AWFUL/AWFUL: AN ARCHIVE OF LIGHT EMBARRASSMENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

The difficulty of representing intangible religious ideas is at the core of *Awful/Awful: An Archive of Light Embarrassments.* Through an interest in how light is discussed in the Bible as a symbol for God and his fellowship, I make imagery that both repulses me and intrigues me but never do I get to the point where I feel the work encapsulates any answers. Instead, the photographs are questions, archived, unable to represent this light of God on their own without being trite or obtuse. The arranged work on the walls consists of these photographs plus a few ephemera from my religious life that help put into context the photos' allegorical tendencies. Through the exhibition, I hope to communicate both a revulsion for pretense and a longing for representations of an authentic faith.

This thesis discusses the frustrations I have towards the way I see and have seen religion performed in my life of involvement with the Christian church, how that affects a believer similar to how kitsch affects culture, why I find this sort of work about beauty and such to be embarrassing, and how longing emerges as a common theme throughout the entire work. Through different types of Christian texts, art criticism, and contemporary artist references, I frame my work within the greater contemporary art discussion about spirituality, light, beauty, and display techniques.

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> In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter.[1]

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[1] C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses (New York: Harper Collins, 1976), 29-30

CHAPTER ONE: CHRISTIAN TEA

I have been steeped in the American Christian church culture for the entirety of my life. Although I have gone to several different churches over the years, they have all been essentially the same in how they perform spirituality. Whether I attended a Baptist, Bible, Nondenominational, Church of Christ, or Evangelistic church, they referenced the same scriptures from the same Bible and produced relatively the same Sunday morning show. Of course, there are plenty of differences in the nuances of their theologies, but they are all essentially "Christian." This "Christian" culture makes up a large portion of my work experience, social experience, and general life experience. My long and committed relationship with my churches over the years has resulted in a peculiar intimacy. I know their ways; I am not surprised when I walk into a new church by what I see and hear. There are almost always smiling people handing you a bulletin when you enter, a foyer with paintings of a white Christ, and a few fake ficus trees lining the way into the carpeted sanctuary. It is actually quite surprising how consistent the behaviors of Christian churches are. This experience, though, is frustrating at times. My relationship with my church is like mine with my older brother. I have the deepest love for him, but I also have a few beefs to pick with him, and I have to remind him to chew with his mouth closed. The church sort of embarrasses me.

Place of Worship

As a student in the arts, I have become increasingly aware of and sensitive to Christianity's visual culture. It is a miss-mash of historical symbolism and kitsch religious objects. This is obvious even in the church building itself. The contemporary church has many hats to wear: office space, place of worship, daycare facility, educational classroom, community center, etc. This makes for a strange mix of décor and mood. While trying to communicate the theological complexities of the Trinity, the church must simultaneously advertise an ice cream social for a "pre-youth camp kick-off party." In the photographs of my current church, Bridgepoint, I point my lens at posters like these and other prosaic moments within the interiors. I was reluctant to photograph there at first, afraid of what I would find and concerned I would simply be making fun of the church I loved. But as I looked at the photographs for the first time, I saw a sense of place, an honest presentation – not anything that would be at the expense of my church's integrity. They showed me what I saw every Sunday but in a sustained manner. They did not offer an opinion. They simply held these scenes out to me in a peacemaking gesture. In one photograph, a pastor's forehead barely shows at the bottom of the frame, a large whiteboard above him shows his notes for the month ahead, and a whiteboard calendar on the right shows his plans for each upcoming service (Fig.1). "Meridian: 'Repent'" is scribbled in on the 23rd as a message title but at first glance echoes of tent revivals past. I can laugh at this image. I can think about the ridiculousness of an entire city repenting at a pastor's call, knowing that it is only a shorthand note, but still I am able to step back and marvel at our spiritual dialogue.

In another photograph from the children's wing, all one is presented with is a red wall with the large word “LOVE” painted on to it (Fig. 2). Simplifying things that are close to the bone, things that are hard to talk about, like repentance and love, cheapens the meaning, flattens the meaning. I attempt to communicate this by exaggerating this flattening with an on-camera flash. The flash from the camera bounces off the shiny paint and back at the viewer. The “love” mural is that much more exposed; now leaning toward comedy rather than sincerity. Like Martin Parr's urban photographs of the American South where he uses a flash for each image, even if outdoors, these photographs of my church are a flattened and unnaturally bright by way of this light source. I mimicked Parr's technique because this flash effect helped the church spaces become exposed, both literally and figuratively. During Sunday School, it is nice for the preschoolers to fight over a Dora the Explorer toy beneath the word “love,” but when this mural is singled out, flashed, photographed, printed, and displayed, there is no more sense of the space in which it occupies. Now the image says, nay, insists, “Love is Red!” and that it is as simple as that.

Other photographs are of the framed pictures in the church office. Here, as in countless other posters and cards I have seen, a reassuring scripture in a calligraphic font is overlaid on a photo of clouds and a beaming sun. They just drip with triteness. These framed posters come from a vein of Christian kitsch objects, objects that, unfortunately, are far too ubiquitous within Christianity. When I look around and see these posters, or other strange things like televisions in every room and donuts galore, I cannot help but wonder at the strange space we have made to worship God. These photographs of my church show both the viewer and me what I see week in and week out. But they also let

me talk about, with imagery, the language problem we as Christians have (when I speak of this group of Christians I identify myself with, I am talking both about the people I spend time with who I know to be believers and about the greater group of Christians I see in the media). This is the language we usually use in the church: one of simplified love, cravings satisfied, and reassurance through the Bible. It is similar to a self-help book. It is not what my faith is to me. I want to punch these trite images in the neck; they are awful.

These photographs of Bridgepoint are humorous because they do what photography does best: they remove a small bit of reality and re-present it in a neat, two-dimensional rectangle. Things church-goers pass by every Sunday are singled-out and deemed worthy of a photograph because they so strangely abut the message and complexity of the church. Unlike, say, a Catholic cathedral, the contemporary sanctuary and its halls are not meant to inspire awe and reverence, but to usher you to a cushy seat and for you to feel casual and welcome. Admiring the church building is rarely done and unimportant to my sort of church. This is okay and has its reasons, but it means we are missing out on a mode of reverence. Awe will come through planned worship songs or a cool children's wing but not from stained glass. Timothy George, the dean of Beeson Divinity School, was interviewed about how our contemporary church lacks this representation of the glory of God and concluded:

> We live in a transcendence-starved culture and in a transcendence-starved evangelicalism... We've so dumbed down the gospel and dumbed down worship in a good effort to reach as many people as we can that there's almost a backlash. It comes from this great hunger for a genuinely God-centered, transcendence-

> focused understanding of who God is and what God wants us to do and what God has given us in Jesus Christ.[2]

I feel transcendence-starved. I feel it deeply. I think this is part of being a human on Earth, separated from a glorious God, but I also think it is because of my church experience. This "dumbing down" that George speaks of is all too obvious to me. I want to witness something *awe*-full on Sunday morning. Or at least, I want to understand why it is so difficult to create.

Baptizing

Part of the difficulty of creating an awe-inspiring, transcendent experience – whether in a church service or in a photograph -- is that it lends itself to pretense, a tired *mechanism for* awe and not awe itself. I am displaying a few photographs of a baptism service my church did in the Boise River last August in order to reference this. A baptism is a very special moment for a believer; it is the symbol of their old life being washed away and their new life in Christ beginning. In the photographs of this baptism, what comes through is not a special moment but how much of a performance it appears to be. People float by on rafts in the background, the large audience watches closely on the river bank, and the pastor doing the baptizing watches the audience with a flashy smile instead of down at the person he drops into and lifts out of the water (Fig. 3).

I remember being baptized. Recently, my mom randomly sent me the photograph she took of me that day. I am wearing a camo t-shirt that says, "Soldiers for Jesus." I was nine or so and my dad baptized me in our above-ground pool with my parents' Bible

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[2] Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson, introduction to *The Glory of God,* edited by Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 20.

study group watching. I remember the pressure I felt to be fully in the moment and not distracted. I was hoping I would come out of the water feeling totally different. But it is like when you have a birthday; you feel the same.

With these baptism photographs, I am pointing at the performance of religion. In the exhibit, there are four photos from the river baptism my church put on. They lie in the center of the main, more public wall between the strange photo of the red wall with the word “LOVE” and the surreal, large smoke images. In this way, the baptism images can relate to both the simulated, performance-type experience and the surreal, larger-than life experience. For all I know, the people who were baptized that day actually had a meaningful moment. But when I look at the photographs, I cannot help but wonder if they are synthetic moments instead. We try so hard to force a symbolic moment into being more than it needs to be. There seems to a pressure for awe, for a glowing dove to descend onto someone's head. Why is this? Are we taught that religious action is necessarily emotional?

Highly Emotional

Where churches like mine have failed in the sense of awe-inspiring space, they have over-compensated for in worship. So much of what goes on in a worship set is meant to bring one to a highly emotional moment, a moment where the believer falls on his or her knees and gains a revelation of some sort. The worship songs we sing repeat things like, “You are faithful,” “Glory to God,” and “I surrender” over and over as if by the seventh time saying “I surrender” you will actually feel the words and burst into tears. This *is* biblical, in a way. Any time the Holy Spirit is cited for something in scripture it is always something *emotional.* But the whole idea of the Holy Spirit is that He is a spirit,

something that isn't controlled or planned. Christians use the term “spirit-led” to talk about leaving room for the Holy Spirit to work. Our worship is, unfortunately, not as spirit-led as it could be and it leads to a pretense of emotion. This has ill effects.

One evening at my Bible study group, we were talking about prayer when someone said, “Sometimes I'm not feeling emotional so it takes me awhile to get to that place to pray.” I was immediately struck by how true this was, how so many of us must feel this way because that is how our church experience prepares us to encounter God. I wonder if we do not need to feel the pressure to come to God at our most profound or at our deepest emotional level. We feel this way, though, because we are led to believe God is mostly, if not only, in emotional moments, not everyday moments. This is the tea we have made from years of steeping in this culture, a tea that tastes sweet but has little nutritional depth. The tag on the string says “*Spiritual*” in a bad calligraphic font and the ingredients list starts with “black tea leaves” but continues with a disconcerting list of artificial ingredients said to “enhance flavor.”

My concern is not that my church is badly decorated or that the songs are too terrible to sing, but that these spaces and songs represent and mold the mind of the modern Christian (like my friend who feels she has to be emotional to pray). Some of the cliché, pretentious things I see so often in church are simply someone's honest attempt to do their best, replicating what they have seen done before. The lyrics to the worship songs, too, are only trying to stir us up to fathom the majesty of God. So why do they make me squirm in my pew? I wondered, after being moved by an essay by C.S. Lewis called *The Weight of Glory,* if God's glory could indeed be present in a church service or

the subject of art without being trite. What I found was that it is difficult to get the tea stains out of my Sunday best.

Pink Clouds and Periphery

My first attempt to get this church language out of my system was photographing sunsets. I had thought that by taking and collecting these images I would wash them out of my system because I would fully understand the inclination to take them. Over the course of a year I photographed sunset after sunset, or even magnificent storm clouds or rainbows – anything that could be used as an example of God "romancing me" (to use some "Christianese"). To my surprise, though, I found myself keeping these photos on my studio wall, not peeling them off with satisfaction as I had expected. And I even continued taking them because I was *still* moved enough by those blasted fluorescent-orange beams of sunlight to take a photograph. I wanted to understand why I wanted them before I took them down. Within this group of cliché photographs, I came across one that struck me as useful. It was a photo I had chosen to shoot wide but the subject was obviously a distant storm cloud with pink light hitting its head. I found myself only staring at that small portion. In it I recognized a clue to my frustrations with the church. By cropping the wide image of the distant pink cloud to only the pink cloud itself, I felt I was illustrating how the church chooses the prettiest and most intense emotions or images to concentrate on. I display both the original and the edited photo side by side on a single wall in the back of the gallery space (Fig. 4). Juxtaposed, they repeat each other oddly, one uncomfortably closer than the one before. The cropped image is more impressive but it is grainy and falls apart on close examination. The original requires study and leaning in to see the distant pink cloud amidst its large blue periphery. This piece became an

important landmark within the work and because of this, small prints of the cropped pink cloud plague the exhibition in order to be a nagging reminder of the symbolism it holds. The diptych illustrates periphery's importance and how we tend to ignore it when louder, more magnificent spectacles are about. I know that God is magnificent, but He is also subtle in the way mountains are subtle after you live by them for years. God is in our most emotional moments but He is also in the everyday, peripheral parts of our lives; He is omnipresent. If a believer operates under the assumption that they must approach God in a profound way, concentrating on that pink hue, then their periphery is edited out and loses importance and prayer becomes an emotionally taxing chore. The apostle Paul wrote to "pray without ceasing."[3] This can only make sense if prayer is a way of life, a peripheral *and* central experience, in the mundane *and* in the sublime. One prayer before supper or when things get desperate is hardly "without ceasing."

The sunset photographs that are on display within the exhibition remain because they are a part of the church language I find myself stained with. They are printed four by six inches from a 1-hour photo lab at Costco. In this way, they read as commercial, cheap objects -- objects that are easy to reproduce and therefore not as precious. The sunsets chosen each have some type of interruption that challenges the image as stock imagery, though. Things like gas stations, signs, and cars are in the photo in order to be consistent with the entire project. I want the mundane, peripheral objects to come in to the scene whenever possible, even when subtle, in order to remind the viewer of reality or the authentic and not pretense. These photos remain throughout the exhibition also to be a

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[3] 1 Thess. 5:17. *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2311.

momentary meditation on the Sublime and its traditional use in religious imagery and/or Romantic imagery.

A few sunset photos make it to the wall but most are laid on the gallery floor in messy piles in order to illustrate my desire to discount them (Fig. 5). Their inclusion shows a more accurate depiction of an obsessive archive that includes the even the trash. These photographs bring me delight and embarrassment at once. They are my kindergarten-level attempt at photographing transcendence. It is this curious desire for beauty and how we affect to laugh at it that I am most interested in. These laughable images hold their ground in defense like a child insisting to color – they hold tight to naiveté. These images of sunsets and others like them of clouds and sunrays remain a part of the exhibition because they are the language of my country.

Part of my life is made up of holding in my laugh at the elements of this language (light auras, rainbows, sunbeams) when they rear their head in a spiritual conversation or artwork. I arranged the main, front wall of the exhibit to be the wall for the viewer to feel comfortable laughing at. Because it is the most public and open wall, I imagine the viewer under the social pressure of the people around him. Therefore, the more comical and absurd photographs of my church and sunsets are arranged on this wall (Fig. 19). In comparison, the back wall holds the quieter, more intimate photographs (Fig. 20).

This work, overall, is me taking a step back and examining how I, specifically, think about, around, and through making work about “spirituality.” I am caught between making work about transcendence and being frustrated with mine and other's renditions of the same subject. Instead of simply laughing, I want to find a more meaningful and sensitive way to communicate why these things grind against me. I do not want to think

myself above other's artistic efforts to represent glory, really, because no one has ever *seen* God – and those who have gotten closest were completely overwhelmed. The apostle Paul was made *blind* after seeing the resurrected Christ on his walk to Damascus. I always imagined it was because of the sheer brightness of the experience.

CHAPTER TWO: LIGHT ON YOU, LIGHT ON ME, LIGHT FOR US

I had always been drawn to light spots on the wall or reflected light on a building, and as a photographer that came naturally, but after I began digesting this desire for a representation of God's glory, I started looking at these light spots suspiciously. In considering the idea of "glory" as it relates to God, I came across ideas of light over and over in the Bible where light and glory seemed synonymous. In some cases, God is even referred to as light itself. John, the "beloved" disciple of Jesus began, what we now call, the Book of First John with this:

> 1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.
>
> 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.[4]

In verse five, John says the summation of what they had heard, seen, looked upon, touched, testified, and proclaimed was simply that God is light, and in him there is no

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[4] 1 John 1:1-7. *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008. 2430.

darkness at all. The face value of this metaphor strikes me as odd every time. The main message he wants to get across is simply, that God is *light*. I looked it up in the Greek, researched what it meant, talked to pastors about it, but I was still plagued by the face-value of those words, "God is light." Those light spots I before only liked for an unknown reason were now pulsing with God. It sounds weird, and I was not making shrines to them or anything, but I was wondering why John and so many others used light to describe God. When "light" and "glory" begin to mingle in scripture it gets even more complex. Jesus is said to be the *brightness* of God's glory. Moses gets a glimpse of God's back, and only a glimpse, and returns to his people *glowing*. Paul sees the risen Christ on his walk to Damascus and is temporarily *blinded* by the experience. All of these instances paint a picture of God as bright light, brighter than we can even handle.

The photographs of sunlight hitting the walls inside of homes are important to the work because they directly address this idea of God as light and omnipresent. These light spots become symbols of God being present in my day to day. The bright setting sun, ninety-three million miles away, manages to get its light through space, the atmosphere, clouds, tree branches, curtains, and is finally stopped by none other than a common living-room wall. When, in the middle of cooking or running around trying to find my keys I see these strange, bright shapes of light, I take a deep breath. I stare at them and wonder at their ephemerality. All at once I am reminded that God, like the sun, is there, far, burning bright and that He is also here, closer than my skin, a spot of light. He is booming and He is quiet.

In another set of photos, this same kind of evening sunlight reflects off distant houses on the foothills (Fig. 6). The same emotion is at play but now a different, louder

characteristic of sunlight is illustrated. In these photos, sunlight travels the same millions of miles, hits the windows of a house, and reflects across the entire valley into my eyes. The sun must be so low for this to happen that most things are cloaked in a purple dusk, beginning to settle in for the night. When this reflected light shines brightest it stands out amongst the dark, sleepy neighboring houses so strongly it is difficult to photograph. Here, if God is indeed light, He is not only in our homes, but bouncing off them violently.

This poetic notion is interesting theologically because in the quoted verses from First John, this light is also understood to be reaching out to us. Thomas Olbricht, a theological scholar and professor, discusses these verses in his book, "Life Together":

> In what sense is God the light? I think that since the emphasis on fellowship precedes the statement about light and reoccurs again following the statement about the light of God, we must say that the light of God is his *koinonia.* God in his very being reaches out to the world and to the creature he has brought forth. His reaching out defines who he is. *Koinonia* is the light of God. … To walk in the light of God in this text clearly means to engage in fellowship (*koinonia*) just as God engages in fellowship. …There is no darkness at all in God because he constantly reaches out in fellowship to what he has made."[5]

This reflected sunlight represents God reaching out to us and how sometimes we reject it, do not notice it, let it bounce off and far away.

Olbricht cites the context of fellowship (the Greek word is "koinonia") and concludes this "light" that is God is found by way of fellowship with believers. I already knew it was important to be a part of a church, but after studying this scripture in depth it became clear to me why. When I am in fellowship with my brother, I am in the light.

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[5] Thomas Olbricht, *Life Together: The Heart of Love & Fellowship in 1 John* (Webb City: Covenant Publishing, 2006), 53-55.

When I isolate, despising my brother, I am far from God; I am in darkness, lonely. I want to bask in light. So I pursue the church I love so much even though it rattles me at times.

Jesus Bursting

My photographs are not meant to embody icons or representations of the God I believe in but to invite a reconsideration of light and its different connotations within my religious life. I talk about seeing God in light but to believe the light itself is God would be incorrect. I am using light allegorically, referring to the history of religious signs that reference light as God (glories, auras, rays, halos, etc.). To say I am using light as a symbol of God would be too direct. In Paul de Man's essay, *The Rhetoric of Temporality,* he discusses the difference between allegory and symbol, the latter having direct access with and reference to the transcendental (within the realm of Romantic aesthetics) and the former referring to a series of signs that precede it.[6] The work references religious symbolism in a variety of ways. There are moments in the cloud photographs where smoke is actually what makes up the cloud forms. It is sometimes difficult to tell that it is indeed smoke, but the warmer, almost apocalyptic coloring and dark mood are useful because the imagery references what Hell has been painted as for years: a fiery, smoky, lonely mess. In a few other moments within the sky photographs, rays of light burst from behind clouds. I also include a sketch I did one day after a friend texted me to tell me I should go out and photograph because, "Jesus [was] bursting through the clouds!" This was meant as a joke, of course, but I include the text so the viewer may investigate how

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[6] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 206-207.

the context of religious imagery, like these sunrays, has moved from serious, symbolic church mosaics to the butt of ironic jokes. In this way, through both language and imagery, the allegory I am using is there to be decoded.[7] What most, if not all, of the photographs in *Awful/Awful* have in common is light as subject. Even the indoor photos of the church have light from the flash intrusively bouncing back at the camera in order to add to the tie of light throughout the work. In this way, the photographs all reference the history of light as a sign for God in some way.

To Bask and to Stay

I frequently use photography as a way to process things that I am chewing on intellectually. I felt the need to make photographs of light I would notice around my home or the neighborhood because I kept looking at them marveling. I also gathered lens flare, gaudy backlighting on flowers, rays bursting from storm clouds – the jokes of spiritual art, essentially – and began using them for my own devices. I wanted to understand how God was light in a visual sense, not a metaphorical sense. I set out to make images of this mysterious "glory" of His. I photographed moments I thought mimicked what the apostle John could have been talking about. These photographs I refer to as the "blinding" images. More than any other photographs I make, these are the most purposely made and constructed. I begin the photographing experience by first facing the direction the sun is setting or rising. I take a moment to feel the warmth of its light on my body. I try to open my eyes into the light and, overwhelmed by its brightness, look through my camera's viewfinder as a sort of shelter for my eye. In it, I see layers of lens

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[7] Jeremy Spencer, "Allegory and the Critique of the Aesthetic Ideology in Paul de Man," *re•bus* (2008): 11

flare and streaming light cloaking the backs of whatever is in front of me. It is as if the camera is stronger than I; it can see and I cannot. The resulting photographs show me something only the camera saw and they, of course, differ from the actual experience. The end image is free of body, of temperature, and only shows me what the camera saw: ground, grass, shadow and light, a green dot of lens flare above – all under a glaze of light (Fig. 7). These photographs fooled me for a long time. I thought the camera was seeing what I could not, and that therefore the images were showing me something superior to my own eyesight. But, as Pamela M. Lee describes of Uta Barth's *Nowhere Near* photographs (Fig.8), the camera is unable to accommodate the accidents of light. She notes, "vision begins to collapse and the alleged capacity of camera vision to exceed the failings of human sight is similarly indicted."[8] I am left where I began: in an inability to see through bright light.

These photos are a simulation of the image that comes to mind when I think of encountering the God of Light that John describes. Each is a photo of a moment where I had to squint, had to bow my head to walk forward. This overpowering sunlight is apparent in the image and so is my posture when taking it because the photo is mostly of the ground. The fact that neither the camera nor I can produce a correct image is analogous to the meaning it holds for me. I desire to bask and to stay in the Light, but its luminous power is beyond my control and uncomfortable. In fact, I rarely have nightmares of being alone in the dark, on the contrary, my nightmares consist of being lost in a scene that is way too bright for me to even open my eyes. I wander around

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[8] Pamela Lee, "Uta Barth and the Medium of Perception," in *Uta Barth.* Edited by Pamela M. Lee, Matthew Higgs, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (New York: Phaidon Press, 2004) 85.

panicked and feeling for help until I wake up terrified. In my nightmare version of this blinding light there is fear, but so far I have only talked about the reverence this bright light would conjure. Once again I think there must be a mix. Christians are taught to fear God, but not a fear of something evil, more like a fear that comes from understanding just how much greater He is, how much brighter He is. At its most proper, this fear of God produces a posture of extreme and fascinating humility. God's resplendent nature must be both terrifying and awesome. After all, the first words out of angels' mouths when they come into contact with humans in scripture are, "Do not be afraid!"

The "blinding" photographs are on the back wall of the exhibit (Fig. 9). They are hung low in order to mimic their original posture and horizon line. Above these prints are smaller prints of the sun itself. I made these photographs after spending some time with Adam Ekberg's work. Ekberg is a photographer who, in calculated performances as opposed to candid opportunities, makes photos that often involve photographing a light source itself. In his photo, *Eclipse* (Fig.10), Ekberg photographs a suspended pineapple against the sky and sun. The sun creates a circular lens flair that he later uses again in other photographs like *A flashlight on the forest floor* (Fig.11). He is playing within the boundaries of the mundane and the poignant. Ekberg states on his website, "I reposition specific celebratory iconography to create minor spectacles." I adopt his use of "celebratory iconography," like the sun or light itself and apply it to my own thought process through my sun photographs present on the back wall. This wall is therefore about this bright light and how the body must react to it and how the camera reacts too.

The blinding images of the ground are printed large in order for the viewer to see the mundane details within the broader, bright image but also in order for the viewer to

get a sense of the blinding light that I am talking about. If the images were smaller, the overwhelming light I am referencing would seem too weak. If the images were very large or life-size, they would come off as confident, and they are not confident images to me. It is more important that they appear as if they were removed from an incomplete archive of imagery that is filed under “embarrassing.” Together, these more quiet images of the sun and bright sunlight wait in the sometimes forgotten, back space of the gallery for viewers to come around the corner and witness a different, more delicate exploration of light in comparison to the front wall.

CHAPTER THREE: TOO MUCH SUGAR IN THE TEA

Where I draw confidence in my work is in the details I did not see when first photographing. The everyday bits that made their way into the frame bring humor and sincerity. They dislodge it from the sweet Sublime and let the image return to Earth. Signs for a campsite, deer droppings, tire marks – these everyday objects disrupt the image and bring it back down from its loftiness. I believe this disruption is important because the artwork stays within a realm we know; it does not speculate too far on a divine beauty we cannot yet know.

The photographs of sunlight mimic real life experience more than a purely romantic image would. I have a distinct memory that helped me come to understand this. I remember riding in a car last August with my hand out the open window on a cool morning. I had just finished photographing a wedding with my husband -- a stressful job -- and we were driving home through the mountains. The cool, crisp air on my hand felt so amazing, so soothing. I began thinking about heaven and speculating if this feeling would be a part of it. At the height of my repose, a very rude bug slammed into my palm, leaving a mess of yellow goo and wings. I screamed/laughed, found a napkin, and thought, “this is so *not* heaven.” This bathos is more common to me than any “pure” experience is. As a photographer who is approaching spiritual ritual in a more documentary fashion, I am interested in how things authentically are as opposed to “photoshopping” an image into being perfectly what I envision. Of course, it is erroneous

to claim that the photograph is some kind of truth; my ability to maneuver the lens to where I want and wait for what I want to see nullifies that idea. But as much as I can, I do not interfere with the scene I am photographing; I just search, find, and shoot. So this bathos, this inclusion of the everyday within a seemingly Sublime moment lets me show the viewer how I find reality to be: humorous, normal, but somehow a part of a spiritual world I do not fully understand – a world that reflects God's glory in everything but hides it at the same time. This reality has notes of honey and other complex, rustic flavors but the more popular reality is just plain sweet.

Another reason I find something like deer droppings to be an important part of the photograph is because I believe the sacred and profane are actually tangled and not separate. A.W. Tozer, an old sage of Christianity, puts it this way:

> At the root of the Christian life is belief in the invisible. The object of the Christian's faith is unseen reality. Our uncorrected thinking, influenced by the blindness of our natural hearts and the intrusive ubiquity of visible things, tends to draw a contrast between the spiritual and the real; but actually no such contrast exists. The antithesis lies elsewhere... The spiritual is real. If we would rise into that region of light and power plainly beckoning us through the Scriptures of truth we must break the evil habit of ignoring the spiritual. We must shift our interest from the seen to the unseen. For the great unseen reality is God. [9]

If not such a contrast exists, and the spiritual and the real are muddled here on Earth, then that means the best representation of a spiritual life is one that includes the everyday. Even James Turrell, in an interview with ArtNews states, “I think most of us recognize that light filling a void can be a very powerful experience—a reminder that segregating the literal and what we call the ‘spiritual’ can sometimes be a meaningless

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[9] A. W. Tozer, “Chapter 4: Apprehending God.” in *The Pursuit of God.* (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, 1948) 33-34.

distinction."[10] I agree fully with Turrell and my "blinding" images I made by shooting into the sun are meant to illustrate both the light filling a space *and* that space being a part of the spiritual realm. These photos feel very ethereal at first, but on closer examination one finds the everyday elements I have mentioned. This also makes sense according to Stephen Nichols's analysis of glory:

> To simply speak of beauty and excellence and transcendence is not theology. That is, in Balthazar's estimation, the worst kind of philosophy, the kind that drifts off into pure romantic, idealistic, and ultimately anthropocentric abstractions. A theology that does not, however, make room for beauty, for the sheer transcendental luminosity of glory, also has its problems. And, in addition in Balthasar's estimation, it is of little appeal.[11]

Nichols states that a theology that is only "beauty and excellence and transcendence" drifts into an idealistic mode. This is where Christian kitsch objects lie, where ideas and convictions are simply reinforced rather than generated or challenged. Betty Spackman, in her book *A Profound Weakness: Christians and Kitsch,* describes the ill effects of kitsch on our theology, similar to what Nichols is saying:

> Kitsch can deceive us by presenting us with a picture of perfection that edits out the corruption and suffering. It can sanitize life, protecting us from its gritty reality. It can fool us into thinking that we can domesticate Jesus or Mary … It can also make us legalistic, implying that only objects or images that are labeled with Christian messages can be trusted as safe. … Kitsch can lure us into a false sense of security and satisfaction when in fact all we have is pseudo-religion.[12]

Spackman talks about how Christian kitsch exploits and domesticates the prettier parts of our religion and how it badly masks a believer's outlook of secular life. Clement

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[10] Patricia Failing, "It's Not About Light—It is Light," *ArtNews*, September 2013, 73.

[11] Stephen J. Nichols, "The Glory of God Present and Past," in *The Glory of God,* edited by Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 30.

[12] Betty Spackman, *A Profound Weakness: Christians and Kitsch* (Carlisle: Piquant Editions, 2005) vi.

Greenberg, in his essay, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch,* states how kitsch "is mechanical and operates by formulas"[13] The same phrase could be used to describe Christian kitsch, of course. Things you can find at a Christian bookstore, like bookmarks with Thomas Kinkade paintings on them or W.W.J.D bracelets come from a reservoir of accumulated experience.[14] They are hints to formulas for a nice Christian life, one that is homey, kind, and safe. Christian kitsch objects are a copy of real experience, but not experience itself. Greenberg states, "If the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch, we now see, imitates its effects"[15] Christian kitsch is imitating the effects of true, sincere religious experience. Spackman understands this and shows us that Christian kitsch can form a foundation of belief on imitation and vicarious experience instead of authentic inquiry – resulting in a seriously faulty ground.

Both Nichols and Spackman are warning the believer of a simplistic, idealistic way of believing. Nichols concedes that there must be balance, room for "sheer transcendental luminosity of glory." This is why understanding glory deeper is important to me, because I know it is more than the kitsch objects and historic symbolism have made it out to be. It is of utmost importance for a Christian to continuously pursue a more complete understanding of God. If a believer refuses to think critically about beauty or thinks too much on beauty only, his or her walk with God becomes one-sided. A theology that leaves room for seeing God's glory, however it may look, whatever it may be, however it may feel, has the correct response: reverence. Because my weekly church

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[13] Clement Greenberg, Avant-Garde and Kitsch, *Partisan Review,* (1939): 5.
[14] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 6.
[15] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 9.

experience does not offer awe-inspiring architecture or choirs, I feel a need for a mode of reverence. My “blinding” photographs are, in a way, my attempt at making stained glass.

Beauty Is Embarrassing

As someone who has been rolling my eyes in church my entire life, as someone who is overly aware of a cynic's cackle, I cannot believe I am making images like these. They terrify me, really. Embracing this fear, though, I have made hundreds of photos over the past few years of light, each time attempting to find “*the* image” that would sail me into a place not confused with trite spirituality. I photographed sunsets, sunlight, sun-rays – all of the key players in the Christian art that drove me mad – and included a dot of lens flare as much as possible. Part of me was inspired by scripture's wording about light and was moved by the photos that came forth, but the other part of me felt childish, embarrassed, and confused. These scenes of magnificent cloud formations, sun beams bursting from mountains, and of the deepest pink we can ever hope to see were so *beautiful*, so classical, so Sublime – the Romantics would be proud and Caspar David Friedrich could use them as painting references.

In making work about spirituality in images, the Sublime is difficult to avoid. It is tempting to force it, to manipulate it into fruition. This act of attempting to make the Sublime happen in my photographs is useful, then, because it is parallel to the act of forcing a religious experience to be meaningful. For my work, I use the word “sublime” sparingly, knowing that it is not the focus of the work to *be* sublime but that the work simply references the Sublime. I use a capitalized “S,” here, because I am aware I am referencing the Romantic Sublime of painters like the aforementioned Caspar David Friedrich. In his paintings, the Sublime was there to communicate grandeur, scale, and

the something else that which cannot be easily pinned-down, something like God. I am using the Sublime in the same way with some of my cloud and sunset photographs. They are not a contemporary Sublime, as I will discuss later, but more of a beautiful and awe-full Sublime. These photographs are trying very hard to perform sublimity.

My most traditionally Sublime photos are my largest prints in the exhibition. They are photographs of a forest fire's smoke plume I witnessed last summer (Fig 12). We were eating hamburgers in Idaho City when the sunlight turned an eerie orange color. Mid-meal, we stepped outside to see dark smoke billowing up from what could not have been more than two miles away. The locals did not seem afraid so I comforted myself that we were okay, but our close proximity to the fire was jarring. I grabbed my camera because the smoke's interaction with the midday sunlight and sky was visually moving. In one photo a small, cartoon-like cloud seems strangely chipper as the black smoke plume surrounds it (Fig. 12). In the other photo a beam of sunlight shines through a brief hole in the smoke. Except for a few antennae visible at the bottom of one image, the photos are of only the sky and therefore abstracted to the point where the viewer is unsure of the scale or whether or not it is even smoke they are viewing. Alfred Steiglitz's *Equivalents* come to mind. In this series, Steiglitz broke new ground in making abstract images of the sky and clouds. He printed them dark and their mystery and force astonished audiences of the early 20th century. The two photos I mention are the only ones printed large because they are the most sincere in their sublimity; they are not of just a beautiful sky but of a beautiful and terrible sky.

The beautiful and the Sublime occupy slippery intellectual ground. Elaine Scarry, Professor of Aesthetics at Harvard University, in her book *On Beauty and Being Just*,

talks of how beauty, at the time of her writing in the 80s and 90s, had been banished from the Humanities, carried out by a set of incoherent complaints against it. It is not necessarily beautiful things themselves that have been banished, but "the conversation about the beauty of these things has been banished, so that we co-inhabit the space of these objects … yet speak about their beauty only in whispers."[16] These self-conscious "whispers" about beauty are all too familiar to me. I cannot talk about beauty without laughing at myself a little, and this is a product of modern culture. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe wrote, in his essay *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*,

> If the contemporary art world is uncomfortable with beauty – a discomfort that seems to me to derive from its irreducibility to other forms of discourse – it finds comfort in the sublime for the opposite reason, and it is with this in mind that I want to see the relationship between beauty and the sublime as one between that which is attractive but irresponsible and that which, however negative its formulation may be, is always apprehended as the voice of the responsibility because it's always attached to a serious idea.[17]

When compared to the Sublime, beauty, as Gilbert-Rolfe puts it, is irresponsible. The Sublime, especially the sort of Sublime Andreas Gursky or Edward Burtynsky is using, is "attached to a serious idea." Their large-scale photographs of industrial landscapes show us layers of information that we cannot see with our own eyes, information that startles us. Gilbert-Rolfe goes on to reference Julia Kristeva who "asked whether resistance to modern literature wasn't evidence of an obsession with meaning, and one might ask the same question about contemporary and modern art's resistance to

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[16] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 57

[17] Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999) 39.

beauty."[18] This "obsession with meaning" has made beauty a lesser quality. Gilbert-Rolfe concludes, "Beauty, in being frivolous, and in that trivial and irrelevant, is always subversive because it's always a distraction from the worthwhile, which lets us know it's worthwhile by not being beautiful."[19] In essence, Gilbert-Rolfe says that an artwork that is simply beautiful or attractive does not have a place in the contemporary art world because it is simply frivolous, extra, useless. He sounds like quite a bully, but his assessment does represent an ideology of postmodernism that tosses beauty aside and focuses more and more on an un-beautiful rawness. My father, a painter of southwestern scenes that go above people's couches, refers to most contemporary art as "mud, blood, n' crud." While this is silly and makes him sound like a little red-neck, I think it brings up the fact that art has distanced itself from the common man towards a more intellectual, research-based process that loses touch with the layman. Where is the middle ground? Is beauty always frivolous?

The Sublime, according to Gilbert Rolfe, has more potential for meaning than beauty. Contemporary art still has a stomach for it in forms like technological Sublime or the Internet as Sublime. Like Gursky and Burtynsky, Penelope Umbrico's *Sun (From Sunsets) from Flickr* becomes overwhelming, sublime, "serious" artwork because it presents its visual information in an overwhelming way. Her installation consists of hundreds of other people's photographs of the setting sun that she found by searching "sunset" on Flickr (Fig. 13). She placed them side-by-side, one on top of the other and created a sort of wallpaper of warm sun photographs. The once trivial, irrelevant,

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[18] Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime p. 46
[19] Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime p. 47

frivolous photographs from Flickr users are transformed into a Sublime experience for the viewer – and, according to Gilbert-Rolfe, therefore up for serious discourse.

Others would not agree, though. In his essay *On the Track of the "S" Word: A Reporter's Notes*, Anthony Haden-Guest questions whether or not the Sublime has a future and notes conversations he has had with artists on the subject. In a conversation he had with James Turrell about the Roden Crater project, Haden-Guest mentioned the "'S' word" and Turrell avoided admitting that the Sublime was part of the work. Instead, Turrell talked about the nuts and bolts of the project, steering away from the word "sublime" and saying it is not part of the agenda he sets for himself.[20] Haden-Guest thinks Turrell is right to be wary, stating, "In our wry times, Pop jadedness still rules. You can talk about your masturbatory fantasies or your indifference to politics – but your taste for the Sublime? Imagine the knowing cackles on Leno, Letterman, or Conan O'Brian!"[21] He paraphrases artist Fred Tomaselli, who willingly embraces the Sublime in his paintings, "It's all about mortality and melancholy. Right? Beauty and death and everything like that. People are probably afraid to talk about the Sublime because it's not tough ... it's not tough-minded, maybe … it's not Cartesian and it's maybe too Romantic for a cynical age. But I'm not afraid of it." Tomaselli sees what he believes to be a reason the Sublime struggles: because it's fragile-minded. We are a robust culture clamoring for success and wealth and smarts, so if the Sublime is not "tough-minded" like we are taught to be, then it is generally looked down upon. Haden-Guest's analysis of the Sublime in today's cynical climate makes it clear how uneasy we are with the term. He

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[20] Anthony Haden-Guest, "On the Track of the "S" Word: A Reporter's Notes," in *Sticky Sublime*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 51.

[21] Anthony Haden-Guest, "On the Track of the "S" Word: A Reporter's Notes," 51.

says the most succinct way to put it is that “we are unserious people in an unserious time,” saying that we are far from the minds of the Romantics of old and occupy a strange space in time where living is easy and “unserious.” Haden-Guest wryly posits that the last of the Sublime can now only be found in deep space, the only place we have not yet polluted.[22]

Because contemporary discourse seemingly demands more than beauty and because the Sublime is equally suspicious, not to mention impossible to photograph (according to Haden-Guest), it is no wonder simple photographs of sunlight repulse me when I try to document a transcendent idea with photography. I spend time discussing beauty and the Sublime because it is a common trigger for my photographs. What remains of my failing quest to represent the Sublime or God or Light is the *tension* between the embarrassment I feel for and the interest I have in light. Why did I continue to be drawn to sublime sunlight if I was simultaneously too cynical to take them seriously? This failure to commit to any one kind of photograph taught me that what I was really making work about was longing.

This body of work is about longing for representation of the Sublime, but more specifically my longing for God, for God's glory, for God's presence – for light. The photographs never satiate these desires, they only carry them from one image to the next toward a more multifaceted question about God as light and omnipresent.

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[22] Anthony Haden-Guest, “On the Track of the “S” Word: A Reporter's Notes,” 58.

CHAPTER FOUR: GROANING IN A TENT

C.S. Lewis describes this longing that comes through searching for God in materiality in this way: "The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing."[23] This "coming through" of longing is precisely the conclusion I come to with my work. It makes sense to me that I am caught and feel the need to stare at light spots or pink clouds because what they strike in me is longing for this "far off country" of heaven, whatever it may truly be. "For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."[24] This lack of wholeness or complete knowledge Lewis talks about is what resonates to my core, what keeps me attempting to make photographs of the intangible. Of course, that is a maddening task. Lewis talks about the awe we have for beauty as an example of our grasping after God in "The Weight of Glory":

> When I was attempting, a few minutes ago, to describe our spiritual longings, I was omitting one of their most curious characteristics. We usually notice it just as the moment of vision dies away, as the music ends, or as the landscape loses the celestial light. What we feel then has been well described by Keats as "the journey homeward to habitual self." You know what I mean. For a few minutes we have had the illusion of belonging to that world. Now we wake to find that it is no such thing. We have been mere spectators. Beauty has smiled, but not to welcome us; her face was turned in our direction, but not to see us. We have not

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[23] C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 30.
[24] C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 30.

> been accepted, welcomed, or taken into the dance. … It is not the physical objects that I am speaking of, but that indescribable something of which they become for a moment the messengers."[25]

Lewis describes the effect beauty has on us and how its fleeting visions leave us wanting. He says one feels and admires this sense of something familiar and lovely but it passes by leaving one feeling apart *from* instead of a part *of* the whole. This is, of course, a Christian perspective. It stems from the beginning, from our separation from the perfect, original dwelling: the Garden of Eden. There, all was in harmony, we were not separated from God, we walked nude, not at all self-conscious of or missing anything. Then we messed up, we were deceived and realized we needed clothes to cover our bodies. We tried to hide from God in our shame and when He found us He said, "Who told you that you were naked?"[26] as if the very idea of nudity was from another world. The serpent had told us, the source of darkness we did not yet know. He gave us this "knowledge" and we cowered in shame. God told us we had to leave.

I feel the pain of walking away from the Garden in everything. I understand that separation from God means everything is off. Children die, lovers leave, jobs take all our energy... amidst this I pine for beauty, goodness, love, grace – and essentially, I pine for God's presence. His presence is all of this, and all of this is light. Apart from him, we pine for him. The apostle Paul puts it like this:

> For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has

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[25] C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 40.
[26] Gen. 3:11. *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 55.

> prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.[27]

Paul uses the metaphor of a tent to describe a temporary, current state on Earth. He says under the body's weaknesses and liability to death we groan. I suspect he uses the word “groan” because these longings are difficult to articulate; they are neither well-crafted laments nor general melancholy. They are groanings too deep for words. According to Lewis's logic, these groanings are temporarily suspended in the face of beauty, and then, as beauty passes, echo in the empties louder than before. We want the beauty again and again. Elaine Scarry posits that Beauty prompts a copy of itself. She writes, “beauty places on us to replicate. The simplest manifestation of the phenomenon is the everyday act of staring.”[28] If one is to stare at a beautiful bird, knowing any second it will fly away, and one has a camera, you can bet one will photograph that bird in order to obtain a permanent copy for oneself. In this way, photography is a deceptive medication for our longings. By obtaining a copy of a moment we found beautiful, we fall under the impression that this longing is fill-able, but we continue to photograph and collect other beautiful things over and over.

Photographing a Rainbow

On a single wall at the back of the exhibit, six photographs of a rainbow occupy the wall space between one side of the exhibition and the other (Fig. 14). They are there to embody the idea of longing and collecting through photography. In these photos, the

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[27] 2 Cor. 5:2-5. *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2229.

[28] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5.

rainbow is the distant subject, but each photo's foreground changes as I took them while riding in a moving car. Street signage, trees, and construction equipment irritatingly dance in the foreground of each picture almost blocking the view of the rainbow completely. The arrangement of one photo after another, with each one obviously of the same rainbow within the same few minutes, is to show the act of photographing and how it is commonly done out of a longing *for* the thing being photographed. The photographer takes a set of photos in order to walk away with the best souvenir of that specific fleeting moment. The longing to repeat and own beauty is shown to the viewer through the repetitive use of different photographs of the same thing. The varying foregrounds let the viewer laugh and find pleasure in the normal and the subtle rainbow in the background of each whispers, “I'm still here. Aren't I marvelous?” beckoning the viewer to find it again in the next photo. Curiously, the stream of photos accidentally ends with my church occupying the foreground of the last photo I took that day. An ugly, humble building, the church becomes part of the same category as orange street cones and signs for pedestrians. I wonder if that is accurate.

CHAPTER FIVE: AN ARCHIVE

The arranged display, *Awful/Awful,* displays the scope of my experience dealing with the inclination to make work about light. Through references to the cliché and kitsch, it shows the inherent difficulty in navigating "spiritual" representation. Both my repulsion toward the ways I see religion acted out and my sincere devotion and desire for a mode of reverence are present simultaneously by the images being neither entirely mocking nor applauding. The work continuously teaches me about the importance of including periphery experience within my religious life, the mundane as a part of and not separate from it all. By displaying my embarrassments, the things that I joke about and laugh at, my hope is for the viewer to laugh with me, but then to also whisper with the work about beauty.

The work is referred to as an archive because it is a collection of photographs and ephemera that records the awe-full or the awful in my religious life. As Jacques Derrida argues in *Archive Fever,* the creation of an archive always follows from an always-frustrated desire to possess a complete representation.[29] This is true for my collection of photographs, snapshots, and notes. It is as if I had a filing cabinet titled "light embarrassments" and pulled everything out and pinned it to the wall. The pun in this title goes both ways simultaneously for me. Displaying these visions of light and confessing

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[29] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25 (1995).

they are meaningful is embarrassing, but only lightly. I know my self-consciousness is a product of a more cynical culture, so I only feel embarrassed for a moment; it quickly morphs into interest, into being more aware of my longing.

The photographs that make up the exhibition are of varying sizes, sometimes repeating themselves, sometimes grouped, sometimes paired, sometimes high, sometimes low. They are displayed in a salon-style way in order to communicate both how fluidly and how complexly the quotidian prayer, the kitsch religious object, the Sublime moment, the beautiful scene, and the strange space of worship intermingle in my day to day. While some series (the church images, for instance) are placed in a loose grid, they do not remain neat and isolated; images from other spaces intrude into their form. A photo of a light spot in a house sits within the church grid so that the images, now mixed within a seemingly classified system, begin to vibrate and relate to each other differently than they would have if isolated. Wolfgang Tillmans's full-room installations have heavily influenced the way I have arranged my work (Fig. 15). He spends a few days installing his photographs, putting photos close to the ceiling and in other unconventional ways. In an interview with Peter Halley, Tillmans said of his installations,

> 'Multi-vectored' is the word I like to use. This way of hanging allows for each of these different vectors to have a voice, so that things are not exclusive. It's an inclusive practice […] The viewer should be encouraged to feel close to their own experiences of situations similar to those that I've presented to them in my work. They should enter my work through their own eyes, and their own lives...[30]

With the photos varying in placement, organization, and scale, the possible trajectories of their "vectors" multiplies and a web of options for relating the images to

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[30] Peter Halley, "In Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans" in *Wolfgang Tillmans.* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002) 33.

each other is formed. Jason Lazarus, an artist based out of Chicago, had a show at the Jewish Contemporary Museum in San Francisco, California that I was able to see. He also took on this type of installation technique. The show, *Too Hard To Keep*, consists of collected photographs, mostly snapshots, from people who donated their photos because they were too hard to throw away, but also too hard to keep (Fig. 16). Lazarus has shown this work in a few locations and each time changes the layout depending on the space. At the Jewish Contemporary Museum, he utilized a small room within the larger gallery space. He taped the snapshots all over the walls, high and low, isolated and grouped. His enigmatic collected photos had room to breathe but also floated in their own world, intelligibly communicating the land of limbo they originally came from.

I find this method useful for my own work because my photographs, like those of Lazarus, have a mysterious quality that is best shown in a way that communicates an organic fragility. Like Tillmans, I want to create a small world for the viewer. Within this world, the viewer can wander, search, find, and make connections on their own. The arrangement of the exhibition also mimics the back-and-forth thought process present in the work. The photos are constantly referencing each other. This creates an innate confusion within the display if the viewer expects to find clear answers. The work is instead ambivalent and full of questions; it is essentially one explosive shrug of imagery. Therefore the "/" in the title is played out over and over through a here vs. there, this vs. that, this *and* that kind of arrangement.

In order to impose additional order and mapping with the multi-vectored display, I arranged sets of photos according to their formal qualities. I have been inspired by Shawn Records's books and website where he places one photo next another of differing

subject matter because of a shared formal element. For example, in his series *From the Bottom of a Well,* Records arranges the photographs of the Chinese landscape by connecting a light dot here with a light dot there, and that yellow circle with a yellow circle in the next, etc. (Fig. 17). The photos transform from separate moments within his travels to cohesive echoes of each other. The attentive viewer will find this same tactic within my display. For example, on the left side of the front wall, I placed four prints near each other according to their formal qualities (Fig. 18). In the first image, the sun is near the center with some circular lens flare surrounding it. The image next to it is of some light switches at my church but the same sort of circular lens flare is present. The photo below has the same pinkish-brown tone overall but it is of the ground outdoors. The light on the ground is coming through a fence and mimics the light beams shooting from the cloud in the image beneath. Together, like looking through Shawn Records's photographs, this group of photos does a satisfying formal dance from one image to the next. In another moment in the show, a tract I was given on campus with swirling clouds in outer space on the cover is placed between two photos with similar color schemes and clouds. By hanging the photos in a way similar to Shawn Records, I can tether the work to itself and to a wider historical religious context because the traditional, sublime elements repeat themselves consistently.

The title of the show, "Awful/Awful: An Archive of Light Embarrassments" is meant to let the viewer in on the ambivalence present in the work. Weighted on both ends -- the beautiful spiritual and the laughable spiritual -- the exhibition communicates tension while remaining open. While the work is intuitive on my part, and therefore highly personal, it is on display for the viewer to think about their own experience(s) with

spirituality or religion. In conversations about my work with my peers, professors, fellow Christians, and a few visiting artists from other universities, spirituality's role in *their* life seems to always come up. Sometimes in a defensive tone, or sometimes in a tone usually used for deep secrets, they will say, "I have these and that spiritual moment too, you know, when I'm doing this or that, when I see this or that..." Then there is a moment when we are quiet, take a deep breath, and understand each other – even though we do not necessarily believe the same thing. I find that there is a need for a safe space to talk about transcendence, God, beauty, death, etc. and this body of work creates a trigger for that.

Back to the Beginning

I began this thesis with a quote from C.S. Lewis. Here it is again in full:

> In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter.[31]

I choose to sandwich my thesis between this quote in order to let a much wiser voice open and wrap up so eloquently what I spend pages trying to flesh-out. This quote probably does not resonate with the reader as it does me. I am well aware it is a Christian

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[31] C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 40.

quote from a Christian author to a Christian reader and that you, dear reader, might be rolling your eyes throughout this paper. But if I could paraphrase Lewis's words, here, for myself, it would encapsulate my project better than my own words could:

> In making work of this desire I have for my own far-off country, for God's holy presence, I find in myself a certain shyness. I feel I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open something that cannot be alleviated – the secret which hurts so much that I take my revenge on it by calling it names like the Sublime and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, I grow awkward and affect to laugh at myself. It is a secret I cannot hide but cannot tell, though I desire to do both. I cannot photograph it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in my experience. I cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and I betray myself like a lover at the mention of a name. What I want to avoid is to call it beauty, photograph it, and behave as if that settled the matter. Instead, I present you with a presentation of the in-between: in-between hiding and showing, laughing and conceding, and in-between the sacred and the mundane.

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FIGURES

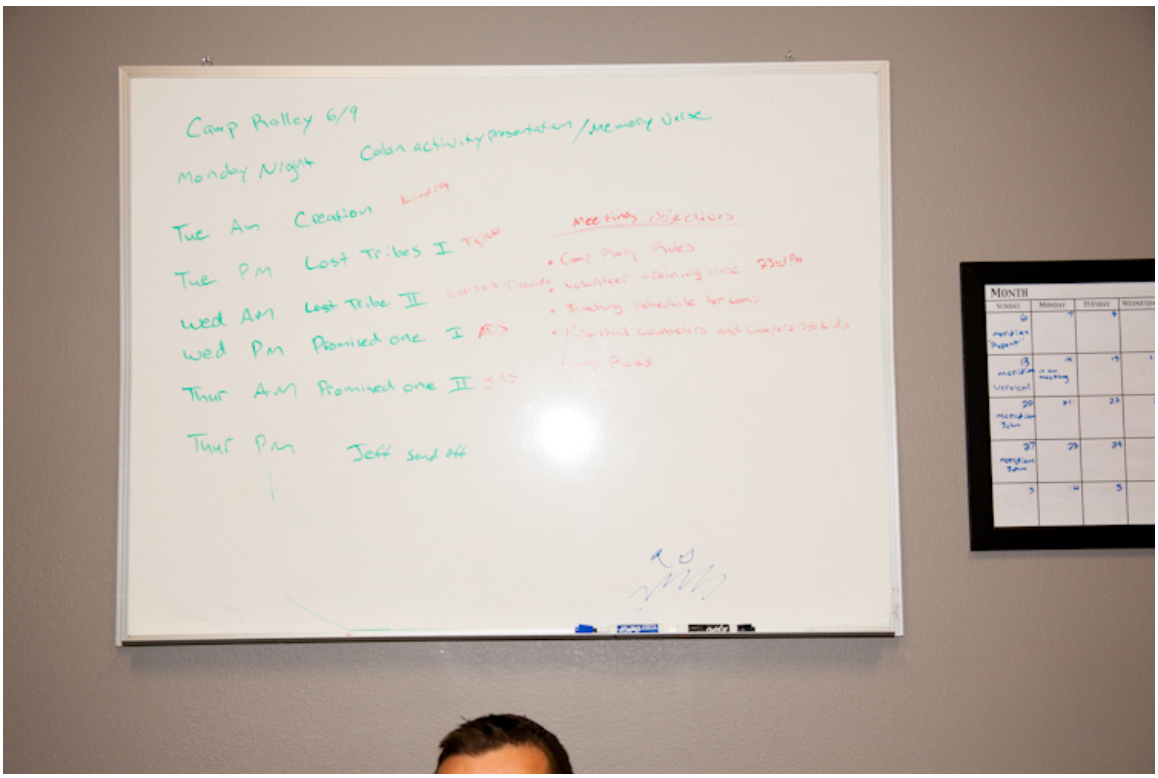

Figure 1: Teysha Vinson, *Pastor's Office*, 2013, Inkjet Print, 17x22".

Figure 2: Teysha Vinson. *Love*, 2013, Inkjet Print, 11x17".

Figure 3: Teysha Vinson. *River Baptism #2*, 2013, Inkjet Print, 17x22".

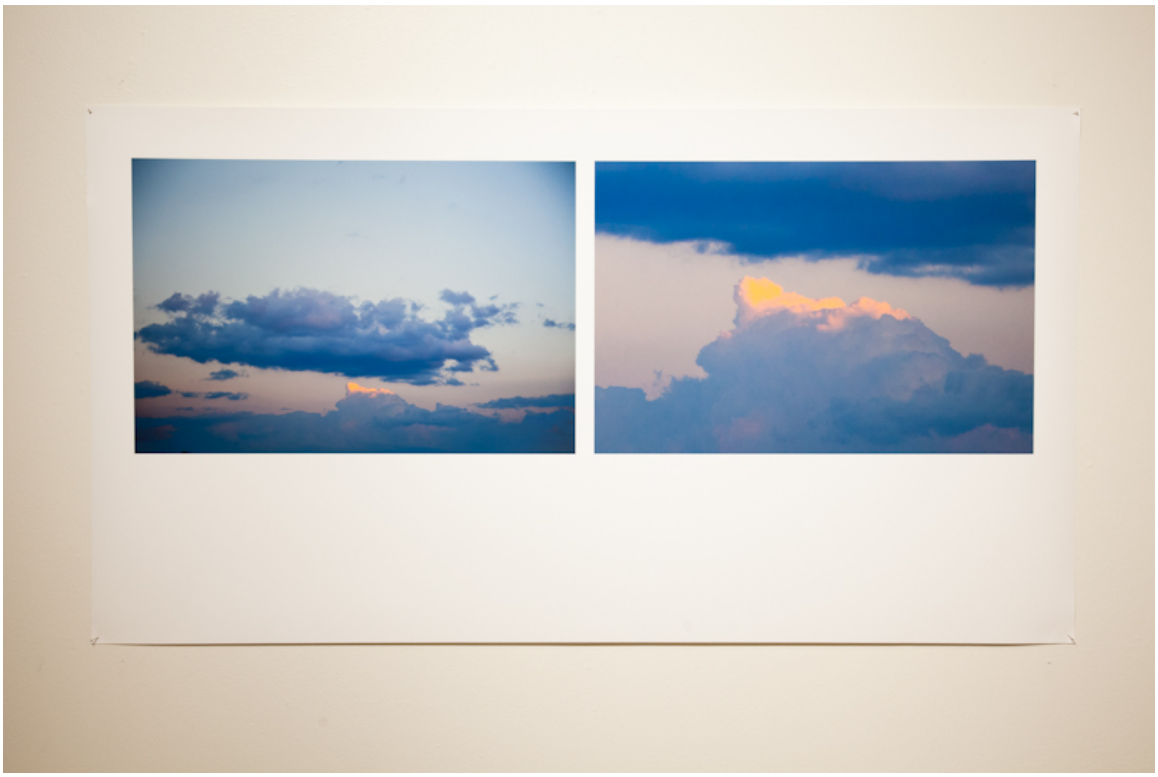

Figure 4: Teysha Vinson. *Pink Cloud & Periphery*, Installation View, 2014, Inkjet Print, 24 x 53".

Figure 5: **Teysha Vinson. *Awful/Awful* Floor 2014, Costco Photo Lab Prints, Installation View.**

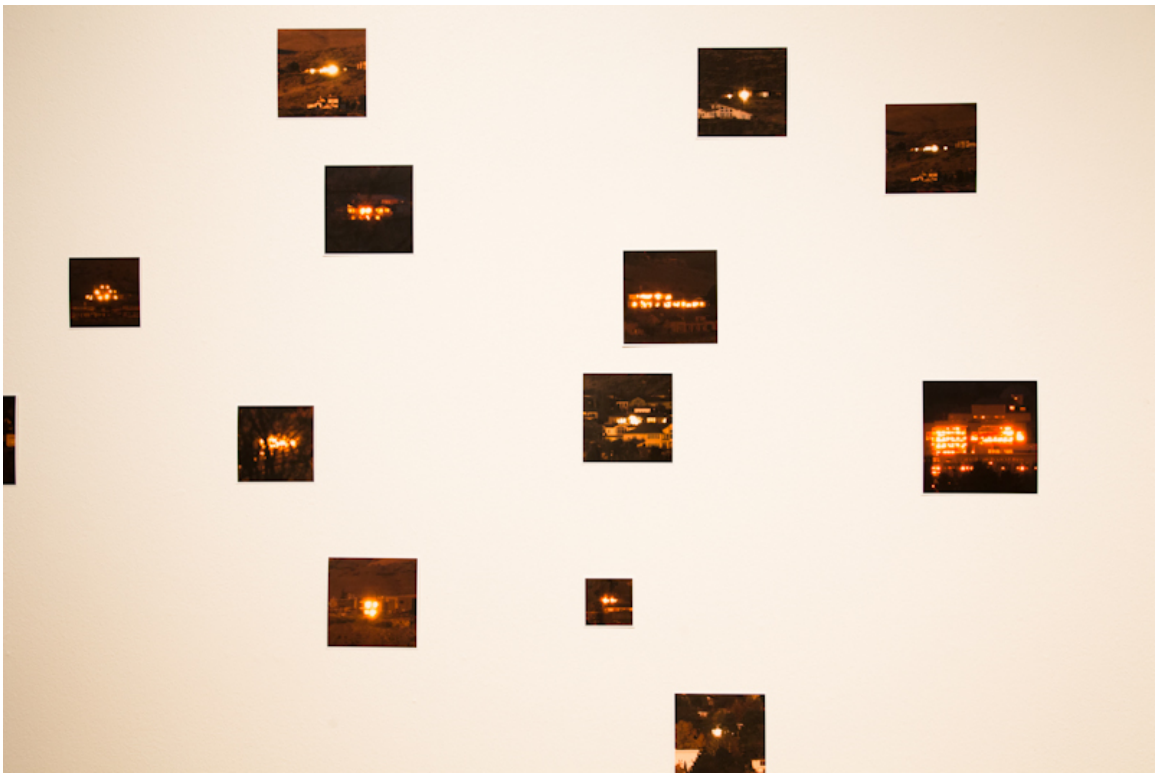

Figure 6: Teysha Vinson. *Reflecting Houses,* 2012-2014, Inkjet Prints, Installation View.

Figure 7: Teysha Vinson. *Blinding #1,* 2012, Inkjet Print, 24x36".

Figure 8: Uta Barth. Untitled from Nowhere Near (nw12), 1999, Photograph on Panel, 35x44".

Figure 9: **Teysha Vinson. *Awful/Awful* Back Wall Installation View #1, 2014, Inkjet Prints.**

Figure 10: Adam Ekberg. *Eclipse*, 2012, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 11: Adam Ekberg. *A flashlight on the forest floor,* 2009, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 12: Teysha Vinson, *Happy Cloud/Smoke Plume,* 2013, Inkjet Print, 24x36”

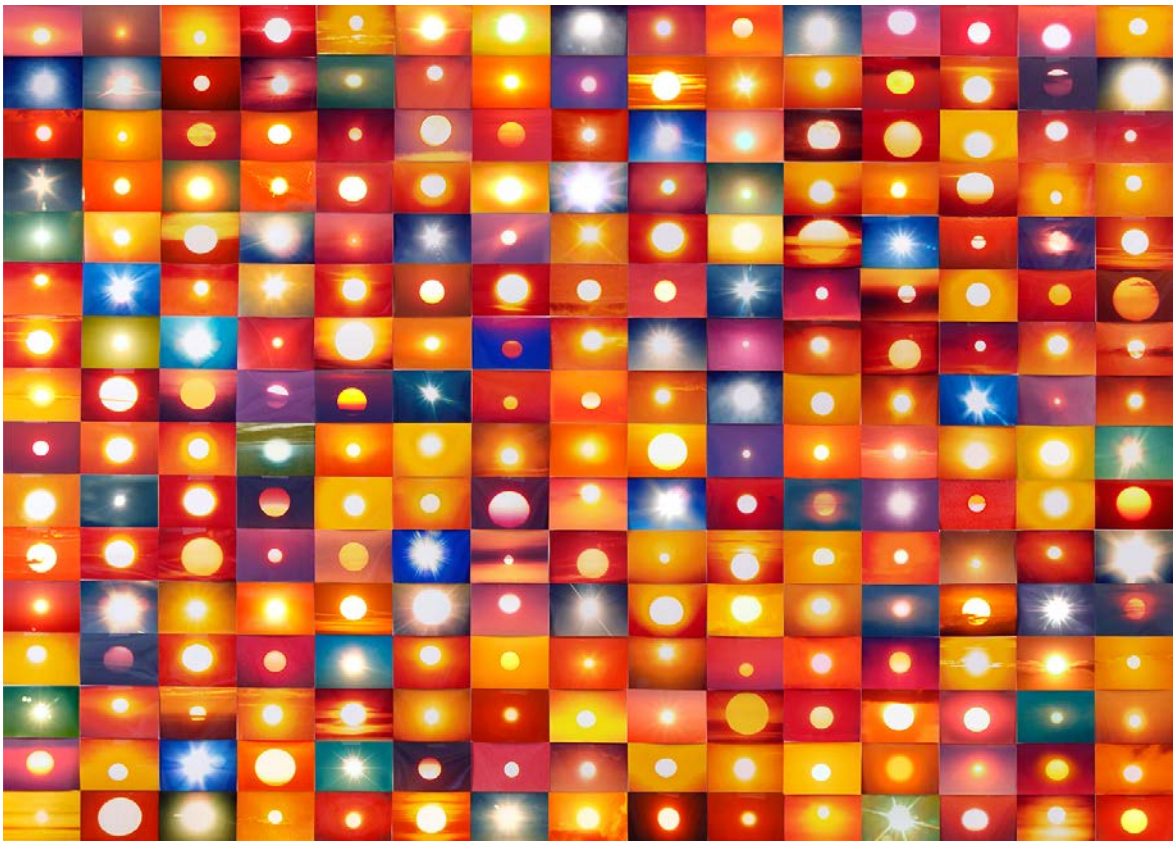

Figure 13: Penelope Umbrico. *Suns (From Sunsets) from Flickr,* 2006-ongoing

Figure 14: Teysha Vinson. *Rainbow Sequence*, 2013, Inkjet Prints, 11x17" each.

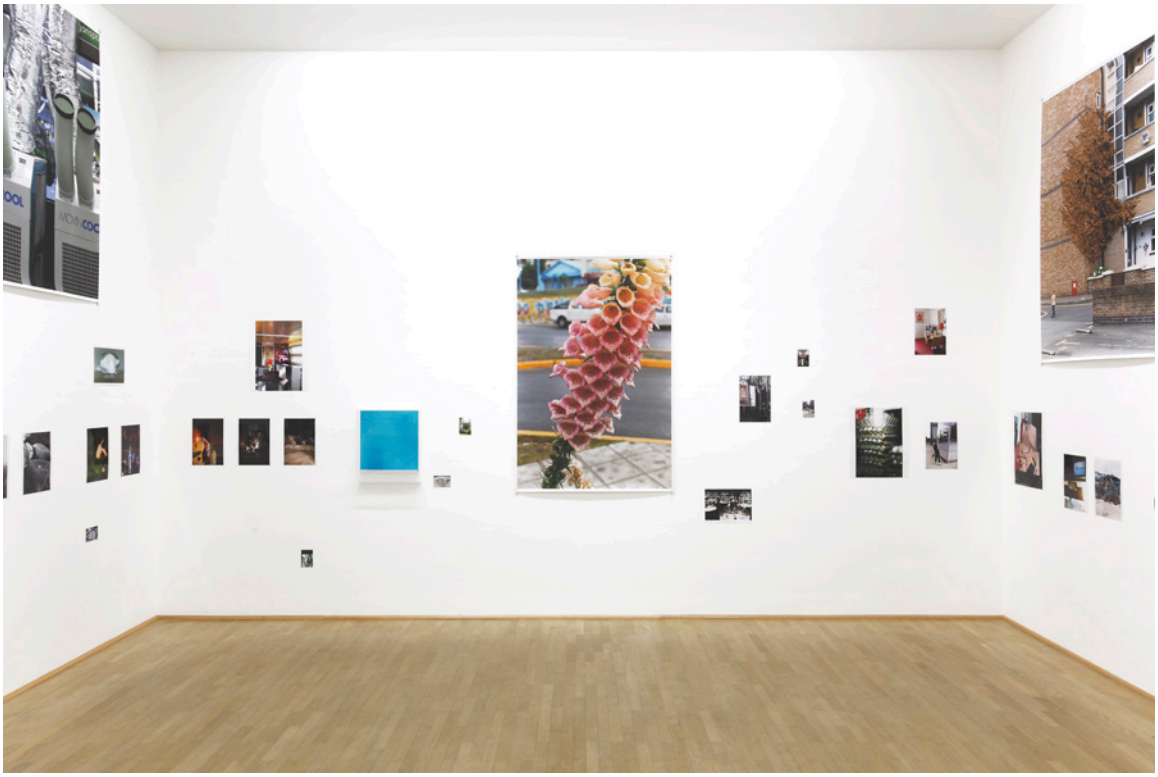

Figure 15: Wolfgang Tillmans, *MMK 1991-2011: 20,* Installation View, 2011.

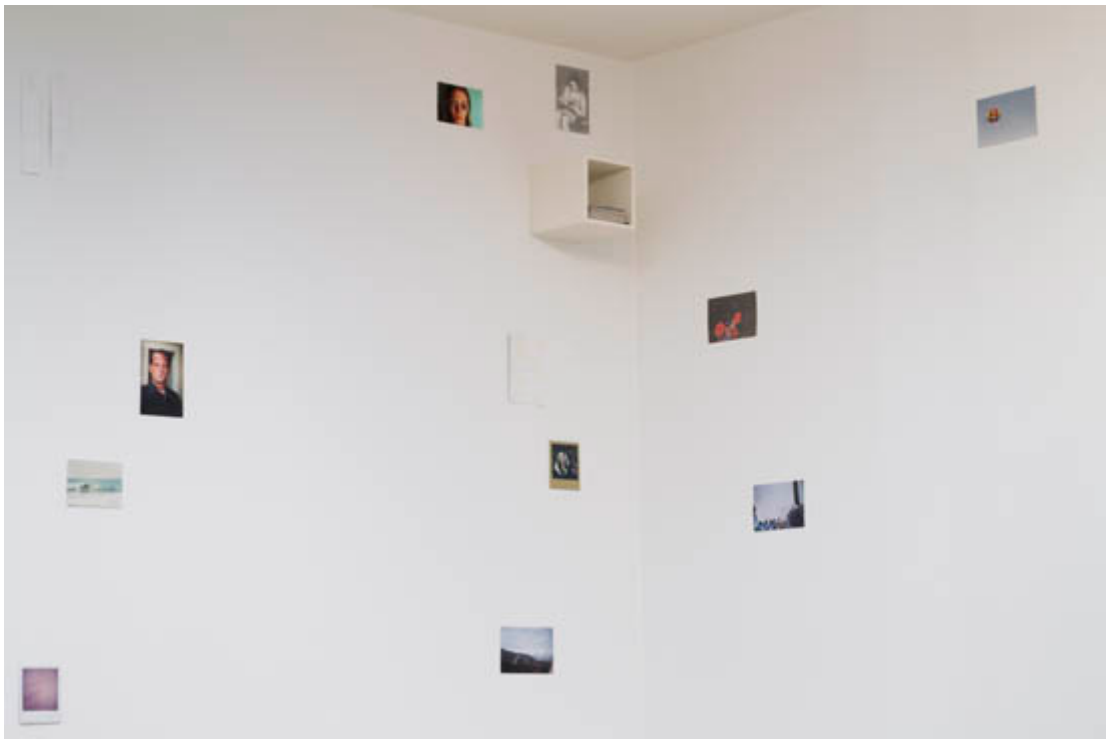

Figure 16: Jason Lazarus. *Too Hard To Keep* Installation View, 2014, Jewish Contemporary Museum.

Figure 17: Shawn Records. Selection from *The Bottom of a Well,* Screenshot from website.

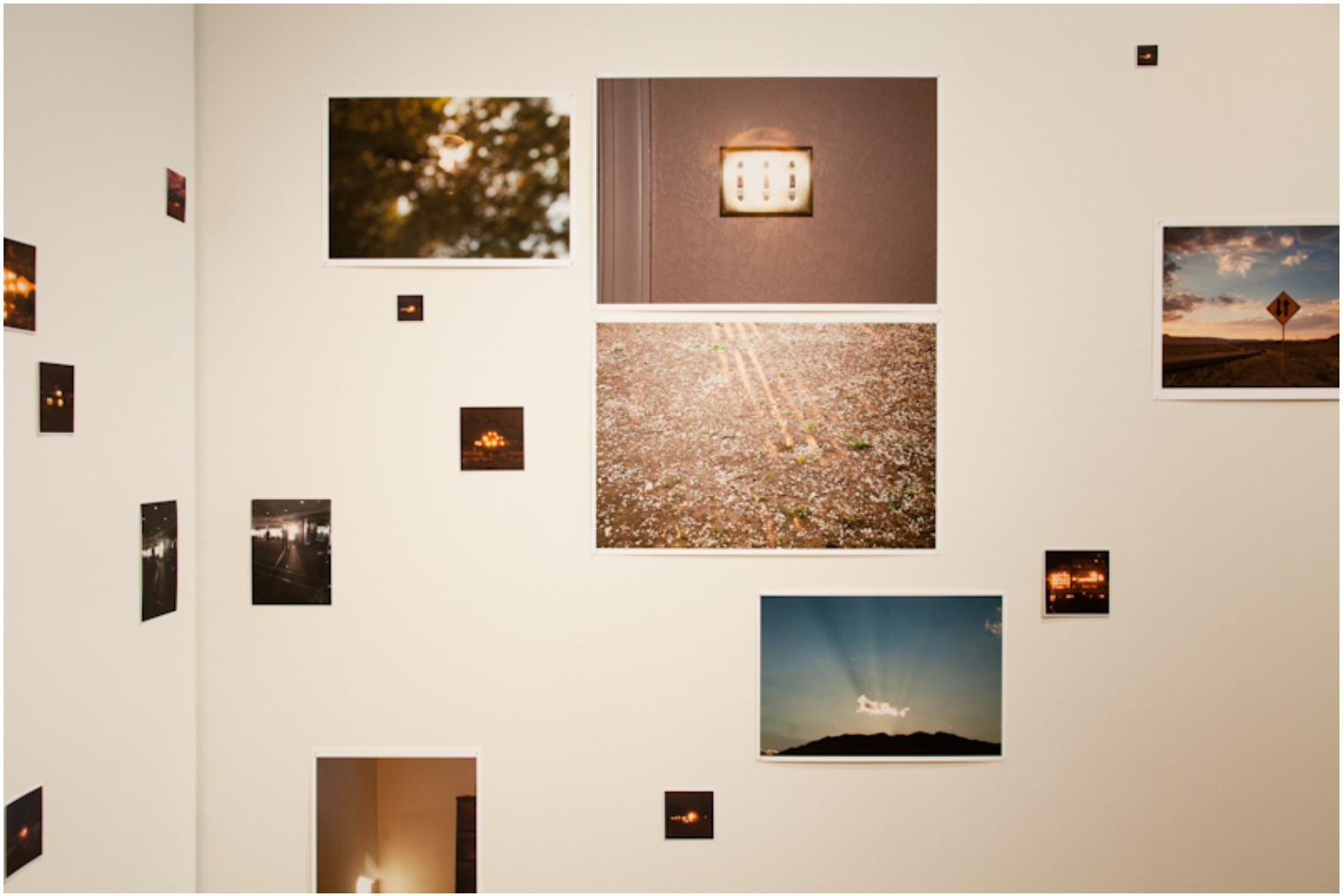

Figure 18: **Teysha Vinson. *Awful/Awful* Installation Detail, 2014, Inkjet Prints.**

Figure 19: **Teysha Vinson. *Awful/Awful* Front Wall Installation View 2014, Inkjet Prints, Found Objects, Digital Prints, Artist's Notes.**

Figure 20: **Teysha Vinson. *Awful/Awful* Back Wall Installation View #2, 2014, Inkjet Prints, Digital Prints, Artist's Notes.**