

Critical Review of Practice

Borderlands

Final Major Project

De Ferrier

"I began photographing grain elevators at a time when I was fascinated with blank walls, empty facades, shuttered windows, and all manner of unyielding surfaces, emblems of an interior crisis." Frank Gohlke.

Word Count: 2494 (Excluding titles & appendices)



Fig. 1

Introduction

The silos have become metaphors for migrants and like Gohlke, I am fascinated by these buildings. Using my grounding in fine art, I became interested in diverse contemporary photographic practice. I am drawn to pushing the boundaries of any medium. Contemporary photographic practice is diverse with no boundaries, using a range of different mediums and supports to inform new ways to produce work. I have embraced this way of working, since I am drawn to the notion of the photograph as an object in itself. The key themes of this project are migration, memory, belonging and surface. My studies have focused on migrants, but more specifically the vilification and hardships that they encounter. This resonates with me as I am a lifelong migrant, so am aware of some of the difficulties that arise from constantly leaving your homeland. The constantly shifting social biome.

I have researched the numerous historical workforces in the Katy area, who range from Aztecs, Mayans, Native American tribes and Japanese, through to modern day Latinos as these migrants are the backbone of the manual workforce in Texas. Although It is clear that the US is a nation of migrants and immigrants, not everyone celebrates it.



Fig. 2

Migration as a Theme

My work is informed by my experience of constant migration as I am concerned with the hidden, buried memories of land, architecture, place and belonging. The historic meditative spaces, quiet, holding so many secrets of the hands that tend them. Throughout my travels I have always been engaged with the local architecture, new visuals and new spaces. I often visit these spaces alone, as it is necessary for me to visit without interruption, because I want to feel a connection to these spaces.

This is a complex issue that can be difficult to fully explain. The US language is English, but American English is almost a dialect that has taken me many years in of living in the US to even come close to understanding all the subtleties and nuances. Healthcare is a whole new language that is difficult enough to navigate for US residents, let alone someone who has just swam across the Rio Grande where militias that patrol the border and are often considered ‘trigger happy.’ A minor accident can take your home, especially if you have no healthcare which is the norm for illegal immigrant workers. I am a migrant, but I am also privileged, since I have a greencard and healthcare, so am generally accepted, although there are still some pockets of “Why are you here?” I want to use this privilege to draw attention to these injustices.

I am not advocating open borders, but I am advocating for humane treatment of migrants trying to enter the country who are fleeing the life threatening conditions in their homeland.

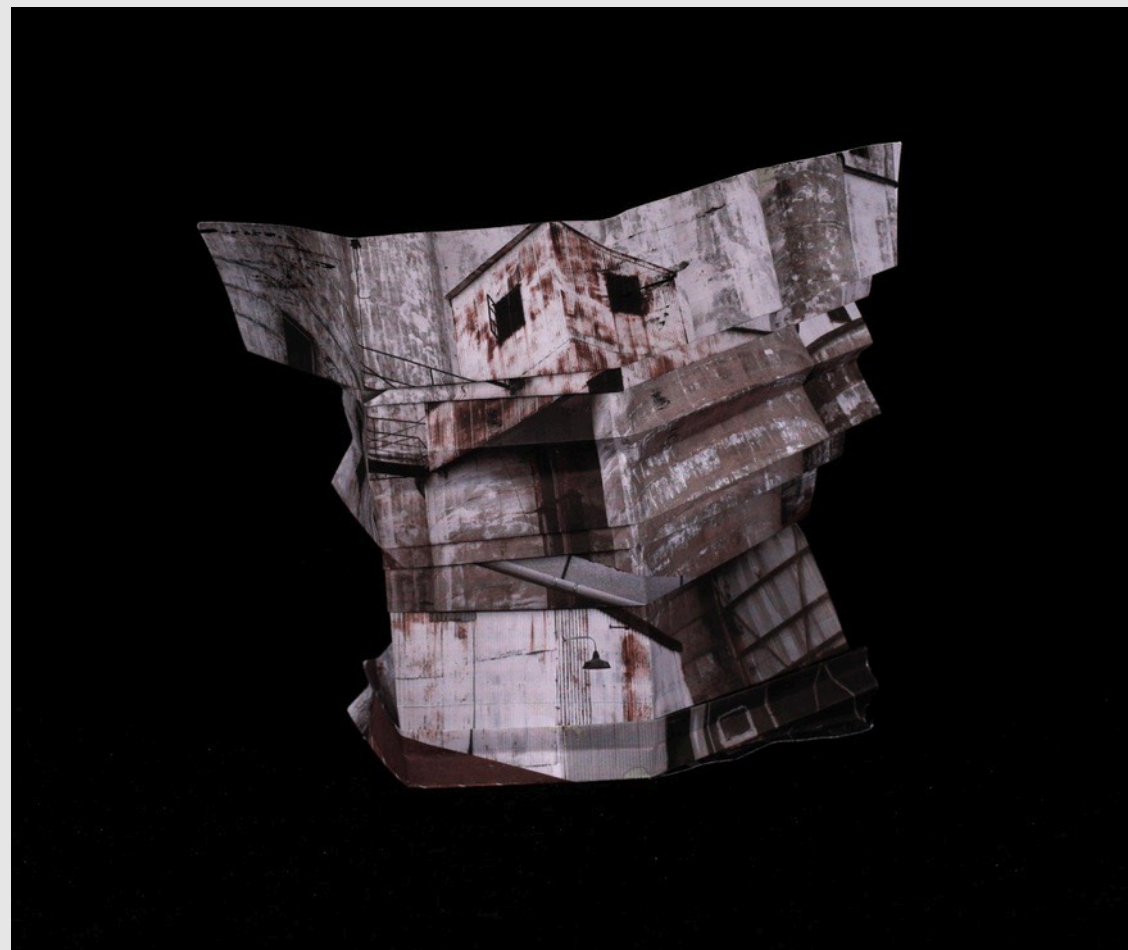


Fig. 3

Objectives

My intent is to create a body of work that raises the historical and ongoing issues of migrants within the US. This includes providing them fair wages, healthcare and protection, the lack of which became even more polarized by the previous US administration. The work should be a silent protest the of vilification of migrants in Texas. I want to draw attention to the inhumane activities related to migrant suffering, as hardly anyone wants to leave their homeland, but they are effectively forced to do so.

My aim is to draw attention to the forced family separations, illegal hysterectomies and sterilization. Children in camps near the border that are removed from their families and prevented from joining families already here in the US are living in atrocious conditions that spread diseases. Children that crossed the border alone are sometimes held illegally by unauthorized personnel in hotels against their will.

My practice is grounded in the photographic images of my current 'home' and my interest is in the materiality of the photograph as an object in itself, with an aim to invite the viewer in, while gently touching upon very sensitive issues relating to all migrants.

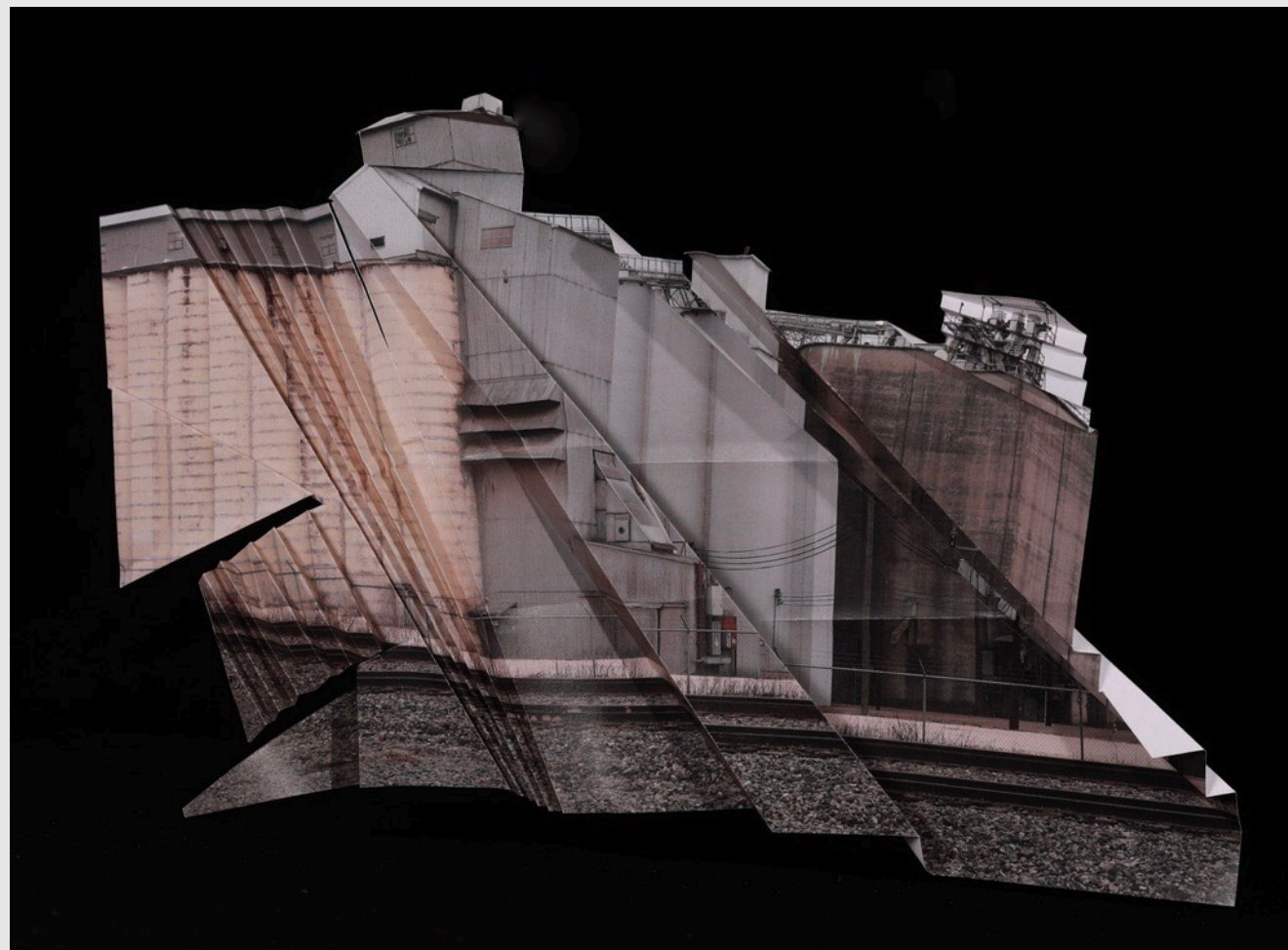


Fig. 4

Research

My research process focused on three main areas of subject matter, relevant artists and process.

Migration and the silos

At the beginning of my MA it became clear that this project would be about migration, since my inspiration comes from my own background of constant global relocation. The original aim was to make images of migrants in my current 'home' but almost immediately, barriers were put in my way, as I was removed from every construction site I photographed on. The workers were willing to have a photograph taken however, the site managers were rather more defensive. I have always been aware of the ethical issues surrounding making images of migrant workers however, on deeper investigation and research I confirmed that it was the construction companies that did not want me there, as my work could expose them and not the migrant workers. The workers are mainly undocumented and the companies that employ them do not provide healthcare and neither do they want to pay a fair wage, but are prepared to circumvent immigration laws to complete their projects.

Covid 19 lockdown prevented me from photographing any migrants. My work took a seismic shift. I started to research and photograph the spaces where migrants have historically worked over the decades: The silos. Webster's dictionary definition of siloed is; *'kept in isolation in a way that hinders communication and cooperation.'* which is a relevant analogy for the migrants.

It was the scale of these massive buildings that drew me to the silos. As Frank Gohlke said, *"...the grain elevator is a center of social and economic life and, by its constant, far-flung visibility, symbolizes to the inhabitants the coherence, vitality, and continuity of their communities."*

These iconic structures provided both work and food for the migrant workers and can be seen for miles. They are situated next to the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railway which was originally intended to transport goods and materials, including wheat and rice, but it has also been used to transport people.

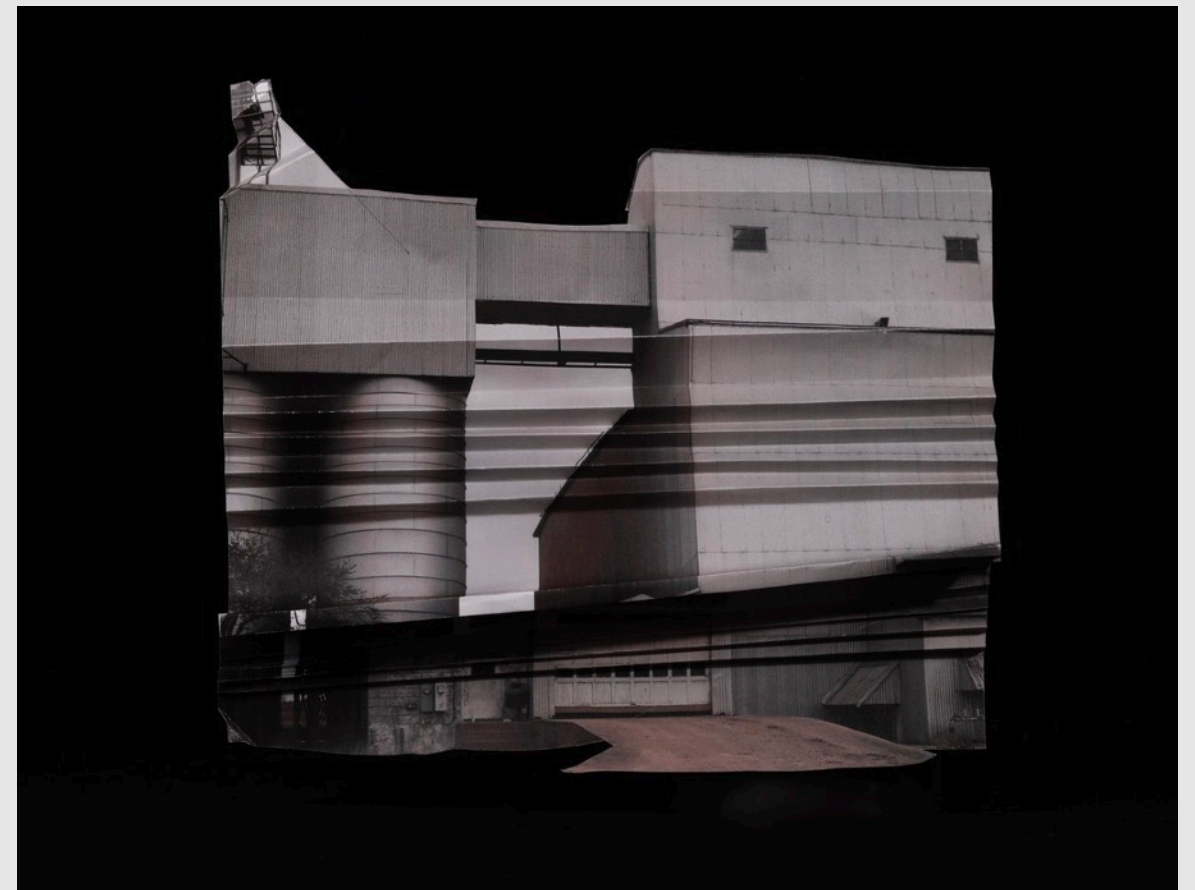


Fig. 5

Relevant Artists I

Jan Svoboda was a Czechoslovakian Post-War artist who became a pioneer in conceptual photography. Svoboda worked in isolation, either at home or in his studio. He initially took up photography to illustrate his poetry, claiming that he was not a photographer.

He rejected the norms of photography and took up a more painterly approach to his interiors. Svoboda's inspiration came from painters, including Jospheh Sudek, Giorgio Morandi and Paul Cezanne.

It was this approach that led to him being known as a pioneer in conceptual photography. Svoboda worked in isolation, mirroring the way I have worked for the past year due to the Covid lockdown.

Like Svoboda, it made me focus on the work I was able to do within the constraints I had been presented with. It was an opportunity to develop a series of boundary breaking work.

John Divola *"Why differentiate between sculpture, painting, and performance when it's all going to end up as a photograph anyway?"*

Divola called this series 'Interventions.' As he stated in his quote, these buildings had already been forgotten, abandoned, and left to ruin. He was engaged in agitating and altering the surfaces to bring a new meaning to these spaces.

I see similarities in our work as we alter what we know about surfaces, what we conceal and what we make available for the viewer to see.

There is a connection for both of us with architecture, the places where people work and human intervention. We are both making work with our hands in quiet, meditative spaces.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Relevant Artists II

Scott Hazard constructs photographic images, cutting and layering to create an object that one can become lost in. He suggests that as the viewer's gaze travels over the layered surfaces, that *'vision becomes almost tactile.'*

In each image, he has created a space for the eyes to linger. Hazard's hands on approach to his work really resonates with me, as it is also very important to me to use my hands to create a new object using the photographic image.

This particular image is similar to my silos and it is interesting to note that these buildings caught our attention.

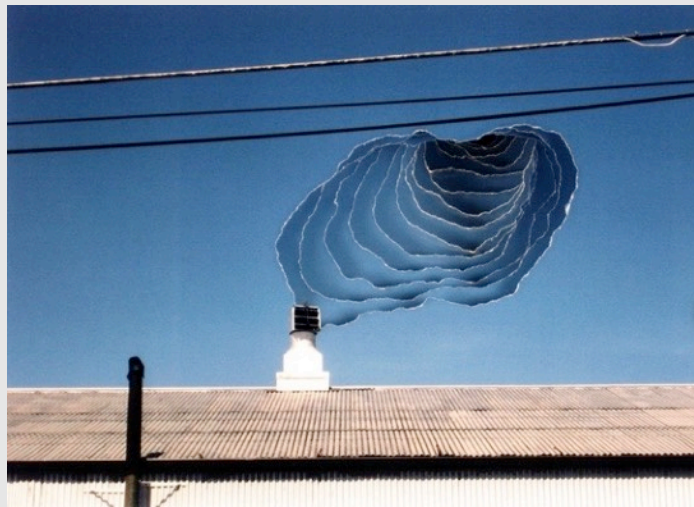


Fig. 8

Noémie Goudal is a French artist who investigates the possibilities and boundaries of her images, reconstructing the layers and pushing the potential of those images, through landscape installations. There are truths and fictions within her work which challenge the viewer to inquire further. At first glance, it looks like it may be digitally manipulated however, Goudal constructs, installs on location, then photographs in analog, whereas I hand build then work in digital.

We both use our hands to make visually engaging objects, which are then rephotographed. Goudal's thoughtful and constructive approach is similar to mine. We both build and construct objects which are then rephotographed. We both create images that challenge the viewer to question what they are seeing.



Fig. 9

Kyōrō Miura is an astrophysicist who developed a way to fold one sheet of paper into a small size. This enabled a solution where only one motor was required to open solar and communication panels for spacecraft, which resulted in less equipment, and space requirements. This folding technique, known as a Miura Ori, is able to be used for mapping, so is highly relevant.

The idea that this could be used for mapping was interesting to me, so I decided to make a Miura Ori. The image below is my first foray into folding. The way that the light falls on this very simple piece of folded origami paper is really engaging.



Fig. 10

Methodologies I

My work leverages the photograph as the first step in further exploration. Both the migrants and I use our hands to shape the respective surfaces that we work on. A hands on approach led to a transformation of folded and constructed imagery. The aesthetics for these images were key to this series. The Texas summers often reach, 38°C, so the sombre look could only be achieved in early morning or late afternoon. This critical timing allowed me to capture shadows, lines and texture of the surfaces.

The folding of the images is a meditative process. I started by hunting the images, which were then printed, folded and dissected to distort, disrupt and conceal parts of the final work; what Divola considers as essentially vandalizing the image. The folded images became metaphors for the vilification of the migrants. After creating a number of manipulated images through folding and cutting, I experimented with photo transfer methods onto cotton fabric.

As the project evolved, it incorporated artifacts from the railway line. This included wrapping bricks, railway pins and cheek-plates from the train tracks in the cotton prints. This created an interesting narrative by physically linking these historical buildings and the adjacent rail track. Variation of scale can create a different feel and therefore an alternate engagement experience, so I experimented by decreasing the scale and set small folded images in resin. While these explorations were engaging I felt that they were not fully resolved, so will not be included in final FMP.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

Methodologies II

I continued experimentation by making a series of printed and handmade books. My handmade book cover is made from amaté bark paper. Amaté is a traditional paper, made in San Pablito by Otomi Indians for use in religious ceremonies, but was banned by the Spanish colonials, as it was deemed to be witchcraft. This was successful as it brought a tactile element to my work, since the viewer can pick the books up to view them.

By increasing the scale of the source images to 4x5 feet allowed greater manipulation of the folds to create form, shadow and new shapes. I made large scale prints, but these were not successful as they did not feel personal. The smaller images were more successful, as they felt more like personal, intimate silo portraits. They were initially set on a white background, and I also experimented with layering them on images of the nearby scorched forest, but the black background felt more akin to a formal portrait. The implication being that while I cannot make portraits of migrants themselves, I can make references to them by showing the silos as close to a portraiture session as I can.

The objects are really interesting and could be included in my planned exhibition at Sawyer Yards in 2022. The intention is to exhibit some of these works in the gallery space for next year however, for FMP submission, a tight series of portrait silo images will be carefully selected.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Dissemination of Work I

My final body of work has resulted in a series of images that I decided to show in a variety of forms. To increase the exposure of my work, I have reached out to a range of audiences using different media.

Website

I have regularly updated my CRJ which provides a detailed ongoing narrative of my research experimentation and outcomes. This has been accessed by visitors from North & South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia.

Social Media

I established an instagram page where I have uploaded multiple images. This has provided a relatively large exposure in an environment where I am able to post WIP images and obtain real-time feedback. This has resulted in two companies reaching out to me to license images and participate as a guest artist in artists' workshops.

Books

The books have produced an alternative means of presenting my work and may be reproduced a short run as part of my exhibition. I have made an accordion book and photo-book, but also made a handmade book with Mexican amaté bark paper.

Magazine

I am currently working on submitting some of my images for Source Magazine's 2021 Graduate Photography Showcase.

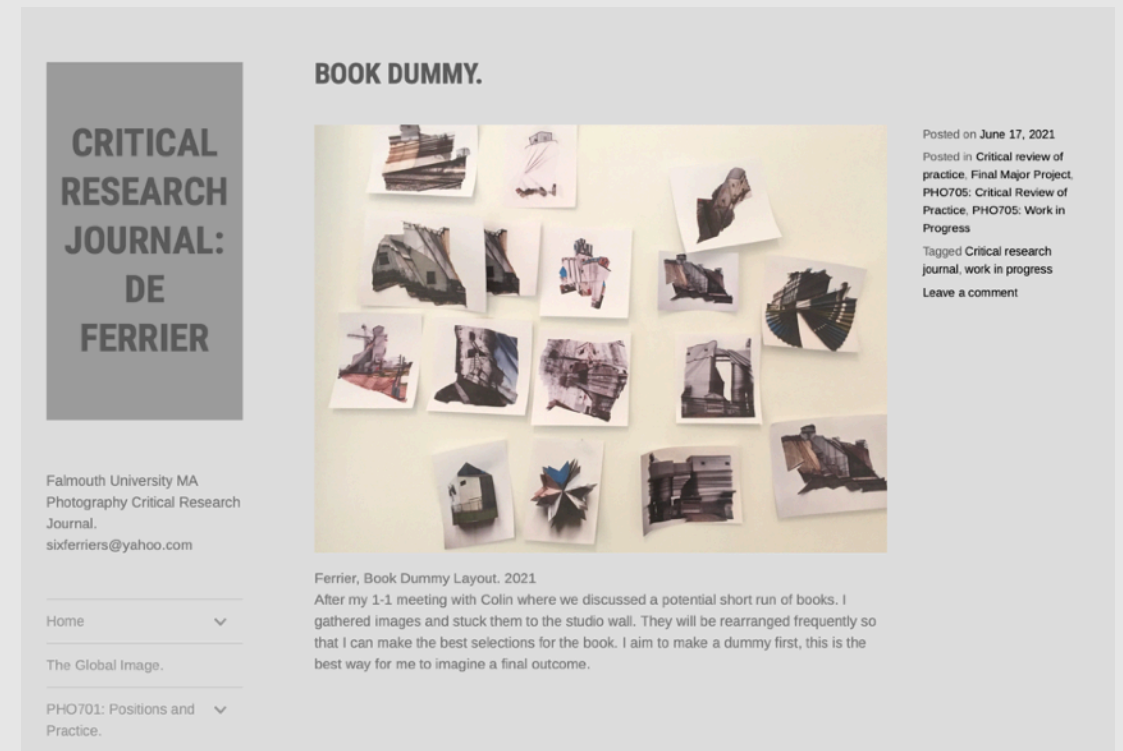


Fig. 17

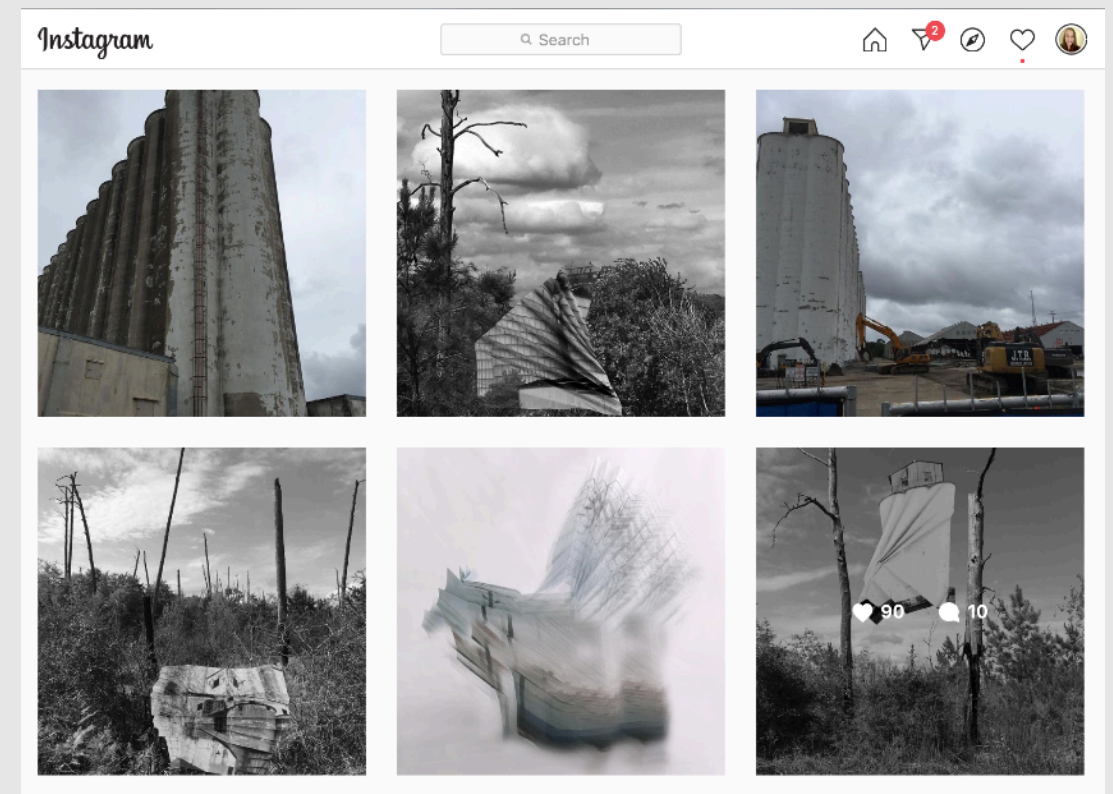


Fig. 18

Dissemination of Work II

Exhibitions

A sense of connection can be created by holding my exhibition in a relevant location, so I reached out to a number of locations that are linked to my subject matter. Covid 19 has resulted in gallery space proving difficult to source in 2021, so consideration was given to several alternatives, including Houston Center for Photography, online galleries, and an open air gallery in my back garden.

Collaboration

The German Bight cohort are planning a collaborative exhibition that I will participate in. Currently, this is scheduled for late 2021 at the Four Corners gallery in London. I have also submitted work for the 2021 Landings Exhibition.

Open call entries

As a means of increasing my exposure in the photographic community, I entered images into UK photographic exhibitions. I entered the 'Out of the Frame' online exhibition / book at The Glasgow Gallery of Photography and have also been shortlisted for student awards section in both AOP & RPS Exhibitions.

FMP Exhibition

Currently, I am finalizing discussions for exhibition space in Sawyer Yards which are part of the Silos complex in downtown Houston for early 2022, as this is the most suitable location, in terms of relevance and exposure.



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

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