

((Slow Down)) (((Relax)))

Hey there, I appreciate you all coming, it means a lot to me. My name is Alec Sellers. I am a graduating Photography Major and this is my thesis titled “The Meadows”. Las Vegas translates to The Meadows because of the wide fields of vegetation that once thrived on the natural springs and rivers. It is no longer the landscape it was named after. This project was born from my childhood experiences, as I had family in Henderson, Nevada. Trips to the area were annual but we would always stay on the Las Vegas Strip. When I think about the strip, I think of blinding lights, the smell of smoke, the sound of a thousand voices saying a thousand things I don’t understand. I think of the signs telling me to gamble, to drink, to go to every show possible on the Strip. I think of the people in bright neon shirts handing out baseball card-sized prostitute bios. I think of a bowling ball falling towards my face. When I think of Las Vegas I think of small death. The dark places my mind went to for the very first time. Las Vegas is the darkest place I’ve ever been.

My eyes are closed.

Las Vegas is a pretty strange place. It serves as an escape from moral obligation and is celebrated for it. But that's not really what I want to talk about. As I worked on this project, I felt its evolution in my mind. It went from a sort of critique, to an investigative survey, to an ecological questioning. But now, I realize that this project, while still pertaining a great deal to the societal implications and the environmental stressors of the Las Vegas Strip, is about me. I was sitting in my hotel room writing after a night photographing and it hit me. While all these other aspects of Las Vegas's geographical politics interested me, everything I was paying attention to, everything I responded to, it was about me and it was about that scared kid coming back here year after year. It was about what I was feeling, about unprocessed emotions from decades ago and about the way I became a guardian for myself. In my proposal I had said that a voice had called to me long ago from beyond those Nevada mountains. I think that voice was the last vestige of my true child self. That's where I left him. In a hotel room in Las Vegas. And he'd been locked there ever since.

At night, I photographed from the view that I once had as a 4-year-old. During the day, I photographed the spatial anxieties that flooded me in a

landscape that did not feel real. I felt, on my own, the hum of the strip and the pull of different casinos like isolated black holes forever on the precipice of converging. Las Vegas to me is chaos in slow motion. A volcanic explosion at 1/16th speed. Having this perspective made me realize, much to my horror, the nature of our avoidant, self-serving search for release. We will look for it anywhere and we will find it everywhere. Even at the end of the world.

The mortal coil is fragile and riddled with phantom pain that has no source. The mind is a powerful tool in this fight against discomfort. It can feel intensely the ache of a sore tooth, but it can also overlook and shut off its receptors while creating the illusion of no pain at all. This makes me wonder at what pains, both physical and mental, I have been able to bury in layers upon layers of aggregate subroutines and avoidant idiosyncrasies. And why, as it pertains to this project, the tops of casinos lining the Las Vegas Strip seem to poke through like skyscrapers in a low lying fog.

(Water) (Breathe) ((Slow Down))

This project, in its current form, consists of 10 photographs printed at 44" x 66", all taken on or near the Las Vegas Strip. The size was an important decision for me; I needed these to be able to bring the viewer into the land. To envelope their vision and emulate a bit of that overwhelm that is The Strip. I have worked with Epson Exhibition Fiber before as it renders images extremely well while striking that perfect balance of a soft shine and a light texture. The cameras used are a Fujifilm X-Pro 3 with a 35mm lens along with a Fujifilm GFX 50R with a 50mm lens. The reason why I chose to use both of these cameras is because of their form factor and differences in sensor size. The X-Pro 3 has a smaller, lighter build that benefits street photography and is equipped with a cropped sensor, while the GFX 50R is a bulkier, medium format sensor camera better suited for detail rich landscapes and stationary subjects. With this in mind, I used the X-Pro 3 for my nights wandering, and the GFX 50R for my days investigating. The lower profile design of these two cameras also allow them to get out of the way in the image making process. I found this method of shooting to be fluid and seamless from what I held in my mind. I usually try to be very quick when shooting to, as Henry Wessel Jr said, work faster than the brain. I refer to this as its current form because my intention for this project was never to be

finished with it after two visits to the place. This project will continue to evolve over the years. I see this working well as both a gallery exhibition and as a book as I am currently making a list of publishers to pitch this/send mock up's to. As far as audience consideration goes, my project is open to whoever would want to view it so I've always thought that my audience could/would be just about anybody. These photographs work together as a catalogue of transitory thought. They speak to each other in a non linear narrative in order to mimic my blending of memory, experience, and then re-experience and emulation.

Which leads me into the changes that came about with my project. The longer I stayed in Las Vegas, the more I started to realize how within the hierarchy of my mind, the physical held little ground. I could not help but fixate, obsess even, about what was happening inside my mind and my heart. I couldn't focus on the extensive research I had done on invasive species and comparing the city to one because I was feeling the waves of memories strike me with every glance I took. I couldn't attribute the history I learned of specific locations because the only history I could recall was my own. I would set out during the day to photograph the ecological relationships of

nature and industry but all I could see was my child self, blurry in the distance with his back turned. I think that I kept denying it because I didn't want this to be about me.

The process for this was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. I traveled there on my own, except the second time, when my fiancé Erin accompanied me. To be on the Strip as an adult and on my own with the history I have with it, was nothing less than bizarre. However I still felt the familiar unbelonging to the landscape. Like a vast and ancient tomb, the city looked down on me with apathetic reception. I felt scared. This place that had brought me so much anxiety as a child is here. It didn't go away, it changed, mutated. As I stood on that sun parched concrete and smelt cigarettes on nearly every passerby, I began to feel the atmosphere enveloping me. I hear the ebbing and flowing of discordant sound. I began to feel small. There was a certain point where I felt lost.

My plan when heading out of my hotel room in Excalibur at 11:30 PM was to go up the strip. No end was set, I just wanted to see what I could see. I first head to the hotel bar. Whiskey was used as a tool in this series. In order to move with the flow of the drunken public. I pictured it like floating through a lazy river. With this in mind, I asked the bartender for a double whiskey neat. I sipped what equated to a splash of Jack Daniels and the price of my monthly internet bill, while calming down. Emptying my head of thoughts and watching, listening. The rolling sound of harmonic wheels spinning and then stopping suddenly and the low roar of a mature crowd. Zeroing myself. Becoming a piece of glass. A few minutes pass and a group enters the bar. They stand just behind me as they look through the menu before deciding on 4 Coronas. They head back to where they are sitting. Picking up on their conversation, I can tell they are all extremely drunk. The bartender brings the lime topped bottles and calls the group over. Only one of the guys walk up and tries to hand the bartender his credit card from over my shoulder, bumping into me as I take a drink. All barstools were empty besides mine. As he unknowingly waves it in-front of the bartenders face like a hook luring a fist, the bartender says, "I can't reach it buddy".

“No yeah I wanna close it”.

“No, you gotta come closer dude”.

“Huh? Oh”.

As he steps forward in between the barstools, I smell sweat and booze. Trying to drown the momentary disturbance, I take a bigger drink of my 2 tablespoons of whiskey. While the bartender is here, I ask to close too. He brought me my check and left before he could see my reaction. Leaving the bar, I barely feel the buzz I was looking for. Noted: Bring your own bottle next time.

(Water) (Breathe)

The casino's front doorhandles are a worn gold camouflage and the wind that floods my face is dry and just a bit chilly. I look around at the empty parking lot juxtaposed in the foreground of new york new york's facade across the street. The city is still outlined against a faintly lit sky that dies in orange embers. A couple, the man significantly older than the woman, walks behind me. He, in a white with blue tropical flower button up, her in a

dress that just barely met her mid thigh. I catch the middle of their conversation as she says:

“I just don’t want to have sex in the same place”

Okay, I was ready, let's dive in. Let's disappear. I reach the bridge that goes over E Tropicana Ave and I implant myself into a large crowd of pedestrians. The flow has been set, now I just need to ride. In no more than 5 minutes I found myself inside New York New York without having any desire of being there. The crowd had thinned after getting off the escalator that touches down onto the casino floor. My next goal was to find the longest way around to get back onto the strip. Surrounding me were tall monoliths of LED rainbows and bright flashing screens. The people attending them were fixated and their stares unwavering. I’m not sure exactly what it meant, but these things had them, that's for sure. Careening around the casino bar I see another set of stairs that reaches the second level where I previously was. Was this the same set of escalators? Had I been turned around somewhere? I felt as though I was in a hall of mirrors. The people began to look the same. Just beyond the escalators I see an exit, finally.

(Water) (Breathe)

I step out of the hotel to find myself in some kind of weak replica of a New York street, complete with the Brooklyn bridge smaller in the 60ft distance. Looking forward I see the greenly illuminated MGM Grand, the lion just out of sight. Walking up the strip was full of memories. I took some time to pinpoint, stand, and remember the time my mother and I waited for my sister outside of the CVS. In that moment, I felt, heard, and smelt everything I did back then. I could feel my lips form the statement: “I hate this city.” and I could hear my mother’s response as it sent a wave of uncertainty through my nerves: “Well, why did you want to go here? We could have gone to LA”. She, of course, was right. My mother had asked my sister and me where we would want to go for a trip during the summer. She offered Los Angeles, Hollywood to be exact, or Las Vegas. My sister expressed no preference for either. What was it inside me that made me say Las Vegas? I had never been to LA at that point in my life and I had long realized my disdain for Las Vegas. So why did I do it?

Why did I lie?

Was it a lie?

In hindsight, I think I was choosing the devil I knew. LA was new and new was scary. New was uncertainty, anxiety, feelings of lost belonging that mutated into a fear so powerful that I would rather go to hell, because I've been there before. I have had my time here in Las Vegas as a nervous, lost kid being led by his parents through a landscape of complexities of which I could not possibly grasp. It was like a maze that I knew the way through.

That moment washed over me in an instant. I still hate this city. I keep moving forward. The pedestrian navigation at times feels like traversing an MC Escher illustration. First you are going straight, you feel the familiar rhythm of using a sidewalk. But then, a ripple happens in the road leading it to turn to the right, to the left, turn around and then forward again, turn left and introduce a set of stairs that lead to a bridge crossing the street to then drop you off in front of a left turn that gets you back to that familiarity. That return to familiarity felt important. Not only for me but for this city. Shock

the system awake, introduce variety, nuance, or abstraction but remind it that normal is within legs reach. You are still on the yellow brick road. The light echoes into the now murky grey night sky. The sky itself was clear of clouds but the pure light pollution from within the strip results in the sky being a gradient of grey that gets very dark, but never reaches black. Almost as if the day is anchored here and can never leave. At about 1 or 2 AM, I was just across the street from The Bellagio when I decided to call it and begin to head back. I had a thought, when turning around: Would the landscape look completely different to me now reversed? Now seeing the other side of everything? I walked for a few minutes and felt my suspicion become a reality. This was a place hidden within the other. I had had my fill of wonderland and I could not wait to be back in my quiet hotel room. I walk past New York New York's statue of liberty replica. When I took that photograph, I didn't realize it, but it emulated the way I saw these landscape as a kid. Everything bigger than me and the sky like a ceiling.

(Water)(Breathe)

Hearing the heavy hotel door shut behind me was like the sealing of an airlock. Like I had escaped and was now safe. I felt this, but my child self felt it more. I set my camera down and lay on the bed as I fall asleep to the hum of the A/C and the electricity in the walls.

After a while, it sounded like rain.

I remembered Las Vegas as a place devoid of stillness. But now, I found the unequivocal abundance of it strange. Sure, I was able to find a crowd to get into and lose my sense of direction. But that was the only time that came naturally. Every other instance, I had to really look for it. I would look for a clump of traffic to jump into but even then, it would soon dissipate. Something had changed here. What I first summed it up to was economic uncertainty. It would make sense that in times of financial stagnation, a place like this would be the first to be turned into a cemetery. Buried dreams and delusions are walked upon by wandering spirits, still believing themselves to be on earth, in their time. The establishment's first line of defense is to drop prices. Once when I was in an Uber heading back home from PDX, my driver and I discussed the weather. He said “Hey, Vegas

is cheap if you want to escape the seasonal depression!” Im sure he had no idea how complex of a statement I would find that to be, but there it was. Las Vegas is cheap? Las Vegas is cheap. A round trip flight there cost me no more than \$150 while my hotel was about \$200 for three nights and late check out. However, I do struggle with the fact I paid \$36 for a “suggestion” of whiskey and upwards of \$60 for a double hamburger and fries. On my second visit, my fiancé Erin asked in a disappointed tone: “Are we just going to eat at chain restaurants the whole time?” Damn right. I can survive multiple nicks at my wallet for a below average meal. But there is a very specific sort of sting that you fell when you pay triple, maybe even quadruple that for a meal that was at best, just above below average by a few fractions.

I digress.

(Water) (Breathe)

Stillness. It was a foreign word in this place and it did not fit its biology. The days were naturally populated a bit more, but nothing like it was when I was a kid or even as a teen. That being said, during the days I traveled

differently. Instead of letting the strip decide for me, I would make checkpoints of places I wanted to investigate and find the next once I was done with the previous location. Everything was faded in the Nevada sun. It was like the saturation was boosted at night but withheld during the day. Along with the design of the strip, I paid close attention to the people. I wanted to understand, at least from a visual and surface level perspective, what kind of person Las Vegas is for. My conclusion was clear to me before I even got there based off of the cities modus operandi.

Old White Men.

Everywhere I looked I saw old men in tropical button ups and cargo shorts accompanied by women who looked even younger than me dressed in very short shorts and tube tops. Admittedly, it was very funny to see how many of these couples walked out of the shops at crystals (A mall full of very high end stores). With this in mind, much of the content in this place makes much more sense. Sex, violence, drugs, thrills, alcohol, individualism, wealth, it all serves men with deep pockets and barren hearts.

In this moment, even more so that night, I resonated with Hunter S. Thompson's observation from Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas: "Who are

these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're real. And, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a lot of them—still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino.”

On my last visit, Erin and I stayed at a casino just off The Strip called The Orleans. This was a common hotel for my family and me to stay at when we visited. Upon getting out of our Uber, I felt like I wanted to get to the room as soon as possible. I didn't want to look at anything. It felt like the hotel itself was 2 inches away from my face trying to get me to make eye contact. I did this subconsciously. We checked in and headed towards the room. After opening the door to the room, so many memories hit me all at once. Everything looked the same. We put our stuff down and decompressed for a while. My muscles barely relaxed as I looked around the room. Every atom in my body was telling me to get out. I photographed the room and the more I did, the more I found that the photographs emulated something. This feeling of being bored in the hotel room like when I was a kid, looking

around at meaningless things trying to figure out what they were and why they were here. The photographs looked like how I remembered the room appeared to me when I asked my mom who these people were in the painting hanging above one of the beds. She'll say she doesn't know. That they're just a painting. But remembering something she said earlier about me to quit stomping on the floor because of "the people below", I say "Are those the people below?" She won't answer. She can see the game I'm playing and does not want to play.

(Water) (Breathe)

While Erin naps I think about the paintings there. One, an impressionistic close up of a saxophone being played. Another, a water color of Bourbon street both sunny and colorful after some rain. The notice in the closet stating that theft of any hotel items will be charged to the card on file. A sign on the A/C unit that reads "please use adjuster by bathroom entrance". The shower had a window that you could unlatch and swing out slightly. From it you could see Mandalay Bay, Luxor, and Excalibur. The soap smelled

like classic hotel soap and they actually left mouthwash! It's been a while since I've seen that. This is when I take that photograph of the hangers as well as the hotel window. These two fully embody that experience. Erin begins to wake up and we both agree that we should find lunch. Heading down to the casino to find the restaurants, my heart just about stops. I'm taking it all in this time and nothing had changed. It was like I was back in time, and I was starting to need to sort through the feelings that came with that. The search for lunch within the hotel failed. We head outside to the front of the hotel to consult the various delivery apps. As we look, every now and again a older men would walk past us and into the casino holding bowling ball carriers. We both began to wonder if The Orleans had a bowling alley.....and weather or not it was the one that yielded me my first near death experience. We find and order some food and head inside. Sure enough, a sign pointed to a pair of escalators that lead up to a bowling alley. As we reached the top and turned around, there it was. This was it. We were even near whichever lane it was, I just know that we were closer to the left wall. It felt like a bolt had shot through my heart. I vividly recalled the first time I ever tried to bowl. I was walking, bowling ball in hand, but I didn't know that

you had to stop walking at some point. I slipped and fell on my back. Still looking up, the bowling ball is heading towards my face like a moon crashing into its planet. Luckily, my dad was near enough to catch it. As we walk up and back down the alley, It really begins to feel like time has reversed and I was back in 2005.

(Water) (Breathe)

That night we ate at the hotels Chinese restaurant that my mom and I would always go to. I specifically ordered Sweet and Sour chicken because thats what we would get back then. The food is pretty good and served as a nice distraction from the anxieties building up inside. Erin and I enjoy the time together before heading back up to the room. There, I start writing by the window where I can see the strip in the distance.

I can feel it. That Las Vegas hum. The echoing influence beyond the window. Waking up in the middle of the night here as a child, I would look out the window and feel...something. Hyper-reality? I could feel every small

rib of fabric from the carpet beneath my feet. I could feel the cold from the air conditioner strike my skin like blades, spiking adrenaline. I could see the Las Vegas Strip's ever burning fire. That Twilight Zone esqe abstract space of lights and shapes. And I would think to myself, "When will I be home?"

Looking out that window as an adult, I think the same thing. But this time, I'm taking that ghost of myself home with me. We have a lot to talk about.