

PANORAMAS: AN UNCONVENTIONAL VIEW OF LANDSCAPE AND SELF-
PORTRAITURE

by

Clayton Arthur Keeling

HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduation in the Honors College
August 2022

Thesis Supervisor:

Anthony Francis

ABSTRACT

My thesis exhibition *Panoramas* began from a progression of my evolving approaches to making images of the landscape and self-portraiture. These subjects culminate together in representing a view of myself and the world as I experience it and have experienced it for the past several years. More than this, they depict my navigations to this instance and the various moments of departure, or scenes of particular feeling or passion. They also present an obstinate difficulty, that we and the world we preside in are inevitably changing.

Unconventionality lies central to this work, applied not only to the craft of image-making and critiquing photography, but to understanding the self as it relates to our world. These questions and explorations remain increasingly relevant in the vast, complex systems images and all representation operates in today.

Ultimately *Panoramas* aim to challenge conventions and provoke the viewer to reflect upon their own story and world history. This series exists as contemplative views that highlight the value of perspective and context, and encourages application of this process to all images outside this work.

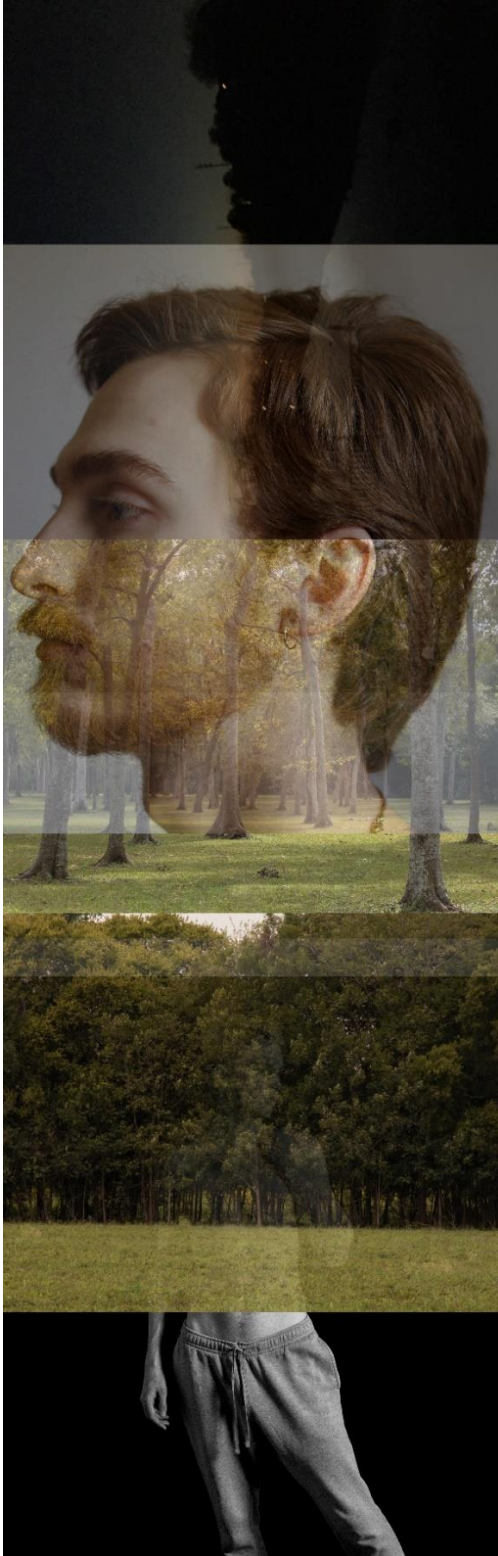


Figure 1. *Forest Body*, from my thesis series *Panoramas*.

Introduction

Imagine a story containing a vast multitude of possibilities, reflective of many individual conjurable iterations. How would such a story appear? How could it ever convey a concise message or clear theme? Now imagine this story as an odyssey of the self and its entire related world. What then does it become? What do infinite potentialities of the represented self and its world generate together?

My series *Panoramas* deals with intricately woven imagery of landscape and self-portraiture. I incorporate my own archive of landscape imagery with new works to express the progression of my approaches to image-making over the years. In the images, I draw upon and critique a well of themes and explorations from historical and personal contexts. Self-portraiture remains particularly relevant to me, and always carries a performative significance. These moments depict not only celebration and love, but also anxiety and questioning, tension and introspection.

The subject matter of the landscape and body create a relational structure that reveals potential reflective qualities. These emerge to reveal ephemerality and the shifting of form, be it the body or the horizon, all follow the inevitability of entropy. The format of the composition as a panorama allows the sight of myself in many distinct stages, and highlights that none will be permanent. This feeling extends to the landscape and suggests it too exists in this amalgamation of shifting idiosyncratic detail, as the forces of nature play out at ecological and geological timescales.

The body in space, and space itself, are subject to this inevitable flux, that entropy drives forward into change. Nothing escapes this changing, let alone myself. These elongated designs serve to unite my captured moments of instability into one coherent

context. *Panoramas* achieve this with a wide compositional aspect ratio, and in the still preservation of scenes showing change in both myself and the landscape. They display moments of myself without limiting them to the typical interpretations of portraiture by separating them from those conventions, namely rectangular framing and representing images singularly. Instead, within the layered, non-opaque subjects, my body becomes the forest, my face lost in leaves. My legs serve as roots, my arms horizons to new skies, stormy beaches and places far away! My faces share sequences of youth, growing up and disappearing into a widely transparent world of ambiguous places.

Panoramas come ultimately from an amalgamation of interwoven layers, visually and conceptually. The pure distillation of identify, performance and the perceived landscape that I myself have been, signify meaning in a way where each detail builds contextually on the surrounding imagery. *Panoramas* tell the story of the self in flux, in its very space and sense of reality, and convey a critique on the conventions of images in general.

Methodology

This work originates from a longing to return to the appreciation I found in photography as a craft when I began making images. I find this appreciation in the unique qualities of image-making with a camera. The camera for me in the most basic sense, constitutes a tool to measure and observe the nuance inherent to all types of light at any or every moment. The camera operates notably with a unique relationship to temporality. The details of a digital image or a negative reveal an uncannily accurate preservation of any possible visual arrangement in the duration of the shutter's opening. Simply put, light



Figure 2. *Austin Nights*, a combination image from the *Postcards from the Imaginary* stage of the project.

as operating within the image, contains the power to reveal subject matter and articulate visual language.

The first sets of images in *Panoramas* attempt to seek an evocative return to this mindset, products of photo walks in the evenings and mornings, in the transitional times of day with light at its most sensitive. Long shadows of daybreak attracted me to the intricate trees of my apartment complex. What a study a tree can make! A tree poses as a mighty subject, rarely failing to stand proudly for a portrait. Its limbs dancing in the wind, backlit by the sky, highlight each leaf and stem together creating an unrivaled show of interplay between light and sky, detail and shadow. In making this section of *Panoramas* primarily from the inconsistent output of photo walks, I find it crucial not only to have the camera ready, but to anticipate and prepare for the special moments when suddenly the subjects are aligned and compositionally poignant or eye-catching. Henri Cartier-Bresson speaks of this momentary balanced alignment of composition in his writings on ‘the decisive moment’ and the mindful image-maker constantly keeps an eye out for these rare tranquilities worthy of preservation.¹

I stumbled upon one such moment on a gray morning in the fall of 2021, when I awoke earlier than usual, and immediately rose to get my camera and observe the sunrise. I walked out the front gate of my apartment complex and across the sunken front lawns, sporadic wildflowers daring to grow in the drainage ditches, to see something rise above the tree line across the street. I peered closer to discover a hot air balloon, rising in the pale golden sunrise. At once I started capturing pictures with the balloon in the distance, while it rose high into the god rays of the morning, until it peaked and descended back down below the trees on the horizon. Those images where the balloon rose high enough

for the sky to fill the frame, composed a majestic world of light with the hot-air balloon peacefully suspended amidst the vibrant hues and streams of sunlight, sky and clouds. Sometimes image-making is simply being available to the world at the right moment.

Postcards from the Imaginary

In realizing the initial personal appeals underlying image-making, I recognized the merit of rediscovering my earlier love and enthusiasm for returning to light as subject matter. However, I felt this to be lacking conceptual depth. In combing over my archival work while attempting to get a feeling for the atmosphere of my past eye, I realized a potential interesting relationship between the landscape images I recently made and my archival material. My archive, composed of mostly landscape series from the preceding years, displays a broad scope of places from around my hometown, Houston, to my current Central Texas setting. These earlier works partially focus as studies on the atmosphere and feeling of place, an exercise on what details we visually latch onto. Together these groups of images amount to representing a wide array of locations, times, settings, and technical qualities. Yet, I feel they speak together, and merely arranging them near one another allows this, before overt manipulation.

At this stage, I decided to incorporate my archival imagery and newer light study work together using solely horizontal lines as a design method. Each combination, would under this rule, form new horizon lines between two or three images of varying light qualities and settings. The use of both my archival material and newer work emphasizes this contrast, and creates a surreal feeling, that these places should not exist composed of such widely varying states. I specifically aimed to combine them on a spectrum of

subtlety. Some of the combinations present clearly combined landscape images. Others layer sky, sea and land so seamlessly, that the portions mix entirely until indistinguishable from one another. Importantly, all these horizons visually signal fabrications, constructs of the imaginary that never existed outside this experimentation. I find this moment in the work forming a strong study of the perceptions surrounding our conceptions of space. Calling orientation of the very sky or sea into question challenges the entire normative construction of the landscape as we habitually perceive it around us constantly all the time. The potentialities when forging imaginary horizons expand as we disregard attempting any semblance of replicating realism, and instead focus on what is visually interesting and moving.

These horizontal combinations conjured the working title *Postcards from the Imaginary*, which though would not last for final iteration of the project, succeeded in instilling a mood of exploration and nonconventionality. Visually, I challenge conventions conceiving space with my arrangement of imagery ranging from seamless, unnoticeable combinations, to blunt, obvious horizons. In this way, the average image becomes muddier to decipher and interpret directly, as the validity of how realistic any one image remains becomes ever more difficult to judge in context of the series. This gets to the heart of my artistic intentions with the horizon combinations. In allowing the viewer in on the secret, so to say, that these images are constructs, I wish to give a better perspective to critique and understand all imagery, even the visuals of the world they empirically absorb around them. This perspective also opens one to the mindful awareness of the all-too-easy dishonesty that photography slips into, a certain forgetfulness towards the absolute design and construction of visual imagery, that there is

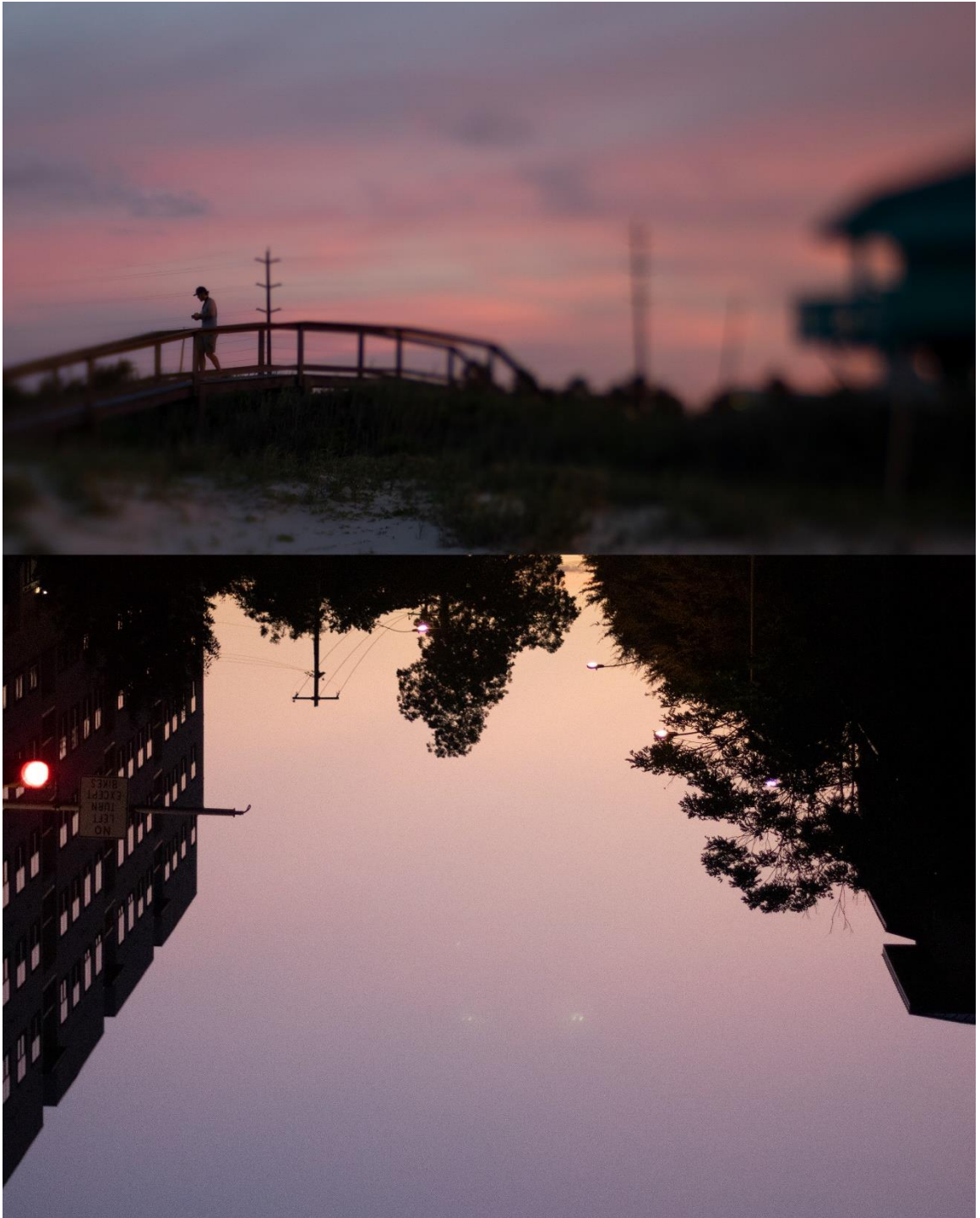


Figure 3. *Magenta Memory*, another horizontal combination from the *Postcards* stage.

no true or straight photography, or any absolute relative standard.

Here I want to elaborate on the ‘dishonesty of photography,’ for this work functions partially as a critique of photography, down to its very nomenclature. To photograph, most directly, means to write with light. However, the image-object of the past does not exist altogether as an object anymore. Currently the image lies far removed from the traditional concept of a photograph.² Historically, this would entail a transparent material, exposed to light, and fixed with chemicals. This negative then could be used with an enlarger and paper coated with light-reactive chemicals, to create a larger photographic print. However, crucial to this entire process and to disarming the idea of inherent truth to photography, perhaps most valid through the darkroom negative, remains the obstinate procedural reality that at every step the image being created responds subjectively to the whims and decision making of the darkroom operator. And these decisions are not arbitrary in effect, as manipulations they leave direct signs of meaning to be subsequently interpreted.

So, the one decisive moment, as Henri Cartier-Bresson suggested on crafting balanced compositions from a shifting environment, should be expanded to an ongoing continuous series of decisive moments, at every instance of contemplating the manipulation or presentation of an image. Any degree of manipulation inevitably shifts visual information and changes the meaning. Furthermore, the vast subjectivity and flexibility of the image in communicating visually ultimately results in a practice of deriving meaning from contextual interrelationships than directly with itself. Thus, one interprets the meaning of an image from not only its visual content, but equally or perhaps more from the context of its presentation and production. How one shows an

image, and the context they show it in, plays a vastly understated role in deriving meaning. Follow the history of photography a little longer and see how this issue becomes only exponentially more compounded with digital image-manipulation processes.

Hito Steyerl, in their essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*, writes eloquently on the nature of the image today, “The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation... In short: it is about reality.”³ Steyerl redefines the operational and existential status of images in clarifying that images now are more about the process and effects of their dispersal through vast systems of exchange than their objecthood. This clearly and immediately distances images today from the photographic art object of history. Steyerl also identifies the appropriation and flexibility of images, meaning as signs they adapt to the signs they are pressed into around them, and simultaneously this changes potential interpretations.

Here then, lies my critique for the ‘photograph,’ based on Steyerl’s suggestions of the image functioning as a radically changed medium compared to the historical photographic object. What is the object we even consider the photograph, anymore? Does the photograph remain in industrial sized billboard prints, not large for enjoyment of detail across distance, but large for the sake of effective capitalistic advertising? Does the photograph remain in the museum, amidst the classic works of history and contemporary art crafters (what about for museum advertising material, or on the cellphones of visitors)? Does the photograph remain in the algorithmically displayed 1s and 0s of JPGs

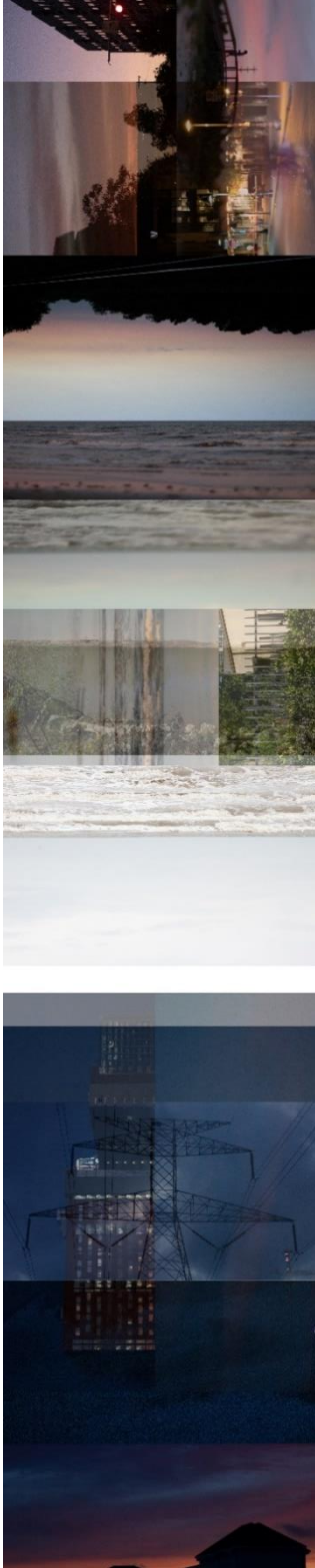


Figure 4. The first composition to set the tone for the final trio of exhibited images, *City Dreamscape*.

and PNGs? Does the photograph remain in the thumbnails of online videos, on the cover of countless magazines, on the front and back of an infinite amount of packaging, on the pages of textbooks and manuals? Does the photograph remain an archive of families, a record of love, history, and life? Does the photograph remain in the innumerable digital images created every day on devices of a myriad of types, for even more purposes?

The expansive operation of the image today exists at odds with the traditional conception of the photograph. If we could ever assert an inherent value to photography, (if we can to anything) that is lost now in the age of the digital. The information of images moves too fast for the contemplative nature of photography, and thus altogether moves on to broader implications and wider ends. While the photograph erodes away and loses past significance, the image-circulation network it began continues and thrives without any switch for the brakes. For this reason, I consider this project as dealing with images and the process of image-making, rather than a body of photography or photographic work. If images have moved to broader more applicable meanings, so too must the entire scope of image-making. Though I am graduating after years of study as a Photography Major, I do not even consider the term to contain the meaning it denotatively claims. 'Photography' moving forward in the context of this work will indicate the historical, traditional, or institutional aspects of image-making, rather than the contemporary image as it functions today.

Landscape as Self-Portraiture

Mulling over ideas of image classification and the visual construction of space, I felt my *Postcards from the Imaginary* falling short of achieving the conversation I now contemplated. The combination landscapes as manipulations and observations from my perspective all consistently represented portions of my ideas, yet I could not shake the feeling of something lacking. I turned to ponder over the relationship between myself and the landscape. While showing my landscape work, to artist Everest Pipkin, they asked me the question, would you consider these landscapes self-portraiture?

I answered after a moment, yes, I think they must be. The landscape carries the mark of my perspective. They portray locations relevant to my personal history, and beyond this they are manipulations with the subtle touch of refinement to detail, light and shadow in the carefully crafted sensibility I hold. The composition, the framing, down to the placement of subjects, convey my own preferences and expression of voice through visual perspective. In this manner, the camera reflects the landscape and the self across each other in conversation, by directly transcribing the visual world through my sensibility of depiction. Due to this, I feel we remember the land as extensions of ourselves. Also of note, in simply viewing the landscape we see strong suggestions of human history, and involvement with nature. This relationship alone, historically, inspired entire profound movements of art landscape photography, capturing the interest of generations of early photographers.

To what extent can we consider self-portraiture as landscape? Were it not for my body in a space, there would be no depiction of the landscape in that fashion. Likewise, my body could not be in any place without my prior conceiving, planning and traveling.

To perceive the landscape necessitates the self, guided by the body. A similar concept pervades in philosopher Martin Heidegger's constitution of 'Dasein'. Dasein is a German word, meaning a Being-there which I am. We could tentatively consider Dasein as the functions of the perceptive human mind in the context of this artwork. This Being-there more specifically constitutes a Being that is a Being-in-the-world. This indicates a layer of foreconceiving the world that partially constitutes Dasein. Heidegger clarifies that "Dasein is inclined to fall back upon its world (the world which it is) and to interpret itself in terms of that world by its self-reflected light."⁴ Heidegger illuminates the idea that the world is constituted within and prior to Dasein, or what we are discussing as the self. Not only are we in the world, but we are the world, and continually from birth we delineate conceptual and spatial boundaries that learn to expand as necessary. This results in the 'self-reflected light' whereupon experiences with the world result in reflections between the self and all prior concepts of worldhood. In this way there constantly exists conversation between the extension of the self conceptualizing and maintaining worldhood, and the self butting up against this foreconception. This conversational relationship ultimately represents a foundational concept for *Panoramas* as a link between the two main subjects, landscape and self-portraiture. How I picture my world and myself through the camera reflects back a view that is uniquely my perspective, but also shaped by my prior concepts and experiences of both.

Conversation maintains itself as a constructive force of art, especially for the ongoing visual discourse within *Panoramas*. When showing the work at the *Postcards from the Imaginary* stage to one of my longest creator friends, Sheridan Smith, and sharing the process of combing over my archival work and the selection process for the

landscape combinations, she presented to me another powerful question. She asked, why not use your self-portraiture work in these combinations too? Ever since setting down the path of creating imaginary horizons I kept the design limitations in place, namely selecting specific landscape shots with bodies of water, or particularly picturesque skies. Sheridan challenging this limitation led us to imagine how self-portraits could become involved. Around the same time, my fellow thesis students inspired me by stacking all my horizon combinations, one atop another on the long edge, forming a narrow strip of horizons in which place, direction and space lost any point of normal relativity.

In this way my project quietly left the *Postcards* stage. Inspired to explore further with less restrictions, I took the strips of horizons and began embedding self-portraits within. Then I started all over with blank working spaces and building the land and self in unison. The final title *Panoramas* derives from this view of myself and the landscape, together only united in this work, unable to be seen conventionally. Just as early panoramas of photography's history bring together a view of the world from 360 degrees, a view non-replicable by the empirical senses, my panoramas similarly unite landscape and self-portraiture and highlight the continually changing relationship of myself and our world, a self-reflected light.⁵

The *Self* in Self-Portraiture and the Landscape

I made the self-portraits within *Panoramas* over several preceding years as evolving studies of self-expression. At first, I added the one-off moments, captured in a mirror at a party or a window walking through the city. These ephemerally captured self-portraits typically were made when I found a clearing from the chaos of my setting.

Therefore, they carry a tranquil, contemplative expression on top of the already ambiguously crafted landscapes of the *Imaginary Horizon* combinations. The added self-portraits provide a contemplative space that expands the scope of the work from the surreal, dreamy, compositions of the landscape horizons to questions broaching on identity and change.

My studio self-portraits leave an even larger presence in the final iterations. In my series *Who Are We Anymore*, from which several portraits made their way into *Panoramas*, I explore the question of ancestry and how this affects my identity, through carefully designing outfits and altering my hairstyle and expression to accentuate my age and disposition. In wondering about where I come from, due to lost or tenuous family records more than a few generations old, I ponder how this ambiguity leaves me open to essentially designing or determining my own identity for myself. This suggests to me that, regardless of ancestry, we should ask how we present ourselves, and for who and why. *Who Are We Anymore* answers this question personally, with variations of created alter identities and styles.

Within the introduction to *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, author John Lahr writes that “personality” is a word whose root is in the Latin for “mask;” and Wilde believed in masks as a way of “intensifying personality,” going on to quote in Wilde’s words, “the final mystery is the mystery of oneself.”⁶ The strong individualization and self-expression of Oscar Wilde in their collection of plays exemplifies an interesting intersectionality between theatre, performance and the self. Wilde’s view of the self as a mask or a shifting personality gives credence to the pursuit of self-expression as a particularly valuable experience. Through Wilde’s plays we see the open and playful prodding at



Figure 5. A self-portrait incorporated into *Panoramas*, originally from the series *Who Are We Anymore?*

questionable norms or problematic societal behaviors. Actualizing self-expression not only creates value for oneself, but reflexively extends others to examine themselves in a similarly authentic fashion.

In a sense my self-portraiture continues my aspirations in theatre, although in a briefer, still, preserved moment, versus the bright and evocative sensations of live performance arts. Nonetheless the techniques and communications of performance work through either the eyes watching a stage, or the lens of a camera. Within self-portraiture, performance emphasizes the unique power of choosing how exactly you wish to preserve a moment of yourself in the image. This autonomy of performance specifically dictates most of the conversation ongoing within my self-portraiture. This is where I emphasize the mood of the technical qualities chosen for the work, where I move my body within the frame of the camera to give a sense of an articulate tone. Performance entails the tonework of a carefully crafted outfit, jewelry or makeup, depending on the character and the desired emphasis. All these details amount to a further individualized study of a potential self, or a variation of a mask one could wear, as Oscar Wilde may put it.

Throughout my studio self-portraits, my performance focuses on projecting a certain quality of introspection. Through my facial cues and body language one can read not only sorrow in this contemplation, but also notes of longing for the past and even peace or content. To incorporate them into *Panoramas*, I spaced them out through varying opaque layers across the landscape compositions. They display not a chronological or orderly meshing, but moreso lead the eye through the wide aspect ratio, and reveal the unique idiosyncrasies of all my characters, without limiting them to an analytic of pure evolution. I contain no limit to strict linear development of character or



Figure 6. *A Moment's Light*, the image that became a central guiding point for the first half of the thesis project, carrying the tentative title *An Investigation of Light and Sentimentality*.

style, but rather exist as a body in constant flux. *Panoramas*, with their intricately woven landscapes and figures, portray this flux across the landscape and self, infinitely suggesting interpretation.

In Conclusion

The imaginary and contemplative spaces brought into conception by *Panoramas* seek not to escape the world, but to bring one into a deeper awareness of their own. This includes an examination of self-history, and the story we tell ourselves of who we are, and how we fit into the complex lives and structures of the world around us. I wish to encourage through this work that this remains far from a static process, but instead one of a continually further understanding.

My work, from the initial recognition of simply its narrow, panoramic frame, alludes to bringing into view the possibilities of self-expression, and how we see the world, when we contemplate it from a nonconventional lens. As one looks closer at *Panoramas*, rather than losing perspective, one gains an appreciation for the intricacy of detail that light brings forth, at all scales distant and near. Any momentary experience of the world can reveal with it an ephemeral beauty beyond any valuation.

End Notes

1. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (Simon and Schuster, 1952).
2. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *E-flux Journal*, no. 10 (2009).
3. Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image", 8.
4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, Edward Robinson (Harper & Row, 1962), 42.
5. Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows*, (Penguin Books, 2003), 155-162.
6. John Lahr, "Introduction", in *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (A Vintage original, 1988), 7-40.

Bibliography

- Cartier-Bresson, Henri. *The Decisive Moment*. Simon and Schuster, 1952.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie, Edward Robinson. Harper & Row, 1962.
- Keeling, Clayton. *A Moment's Light*. 2022. Digital composition.
- Keeling, Clayton. *Austin Nights*. 2022. Digital composition.
- Keeling, Clayton. *City Dreamscape*. 2022. Inkjet print.
- Keeling, Clayton. *Forest Body*. 2022. Inkjet Print.
- Keeling, Clayton. *Magenta Memory*. 2022. Digital composition.
- Keeling, Clayton. *Self-Portrait*. 2020. Digital image.
- Lahr, John. "Introduction." In *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*. A Vintage original, 1988.

Solnit, Rebecca. *River of Shadow*. Penguin Books, 2003.

Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." *E-flux Journal*, no 10 (2009).