The Big Dark

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Background

It was just about five years ago that I started off on the journey that is now coming to an end. I was unhappily working away in the commercial photo industry as a digital technician and second shooter. Not a bad gig for a young man. I was making decent money, got to do a lot of traveling, and had the freedom of being a freelancer. But there was something big missing. This supposedly “creative” job I had was a farce. I did nothing creative; it was just the opposite. I was working in a factory pumping out the same image day after day. The majority of my time was spent retouching dust spots off of gray and white backgrounds, fixing flyaway hairs from models heads, and removing blemishes from their skin. This was a far cry from the magic that got me interested in photography when I was sixteen. After much thought, I quit the photo industry and devised a plan. I would go back to school to finish my bachelors, than apply to grad school and get my masters degree in studio art. I would make a new life in art and academia. I had decided I would become an artist/educator. And so I was off in search of creativity and knowledge; off in search of illumination.

My time spent finishing my undergrad degree was instrumental in my becoming the artist I am today. Much of my time was spent shedding my commercial past and trying to unlearn much of what had become almost instinctual while working in the commercial industry. In a sense, I was learning how to be creative again. I had become so accustomed to making others’ ideas happen that I had stopped considering my own. At the same time, though, I was learning what aspects of my commercial knowledge I could make use of as an artist. My skills in lighting and set design/construction would
become instrumental in my work. It was also during my time at the University of Texas at Arlington that I began to realize my interest in science, ecology and astronomy, especially; something that sparked the sense of wonder that is such a huge part of my work today.

**Initial Graduate Work**

It wasn’t until I entered my graduate program that my work really began to take its current shape. During my undergraduate studies I had developed such a recognizable style that I felt it was important for me to begin fresh for my graduate program. It was also during this time, when I found myself unhindered by assignments and deadlines, that the concept of illumination began manifesting itself heavily in my work. Light is everything to photography. It’s the stuff that makes the magic happen. Most photographers, though, simply use it to illuminate their subject. I realized that I had become more interested in using light as a raw material. Instead of it being the practical application of the medium of photography, light had become an important conceptual tool, as well. The idea of the void also began manifesting itself in my work, and thus the darkness, or a lack of light, became just as important.

One of the first bodies of work I created when I arrived at grad school was the series *Observe* (fig. 1, 11). To capture these images, I utilized a game camera- a motion activated infrared camera used by hunters to track prey movement. I attached the camera to the ceiling above my bed and let it run for two weeks, capturing images as I slept. The end result was a series of unconscious self-portraits. There were things at
play within the images that I was unaware of at the time they were taken. What began as an experiment with an unusual camera and an idea of photographing myself unconsciously had become much more. There was an immediate breakdown of the standard role between camera and subject, or even artist and subject. Much of the control had been taken away from the artist, and was handed over to a motion sensor. Besides that, there was also an interesting reassignment of roles; by using a game camera, that is a camera designed to capture game in the wild, the subject of the images became prey, and the viewer became the hunter.

The images also question man’s relationship to nature, as well as his animalistic tendencies. The transition from dark to light is an extremely important aspect of this series. The initial image is almost completely black; there is very little to clue the viewer into what they are seeing. As the series progresses, the images become lighter, revealing that the subject of the images is a man sleeping. This transition is evident; it is night turning into day. The man is moving from the dream world into the waking world. The subject of the image, more so than the sleeping man, is the darkness that envelops him, and the light that slowly illuminates him.
During my graduate studies, I also began experimenting with video. One of my first video pieces, *Slip* (fig. 2), was filmed while I was assisting on a research trip to Alaska. The video was shot using a technique called afocal photography, which utilizes a secondary telescopic device to increase the range of the camera. In this case I filmed through a spotting scope. I did not attach the camera to the scope, but shot handheld, which allows for the fluid movement of the central image as well as the dark area floating around the video. This gives the effect that a spotlight is revealing the image. The image in the video is of an iceberg floating in a glacier-fed lake. Everything is sitting on its side, giving the impression that gravity is not working, or that the laws of physics have come undone. The image seems to be slipping away from us, and things are about to crumble away completely. For me, this video speaks to the anxieties of existence. Most of the time, we wander around, unaware of how precious our time and unsure our future existence is. Every once in a while, though, we experience a jarring reminder of how little control we have over our surroundings. We live in an ecologically aware society where our future is becoming more and more uncertain. Everyone is aware that
we are putting a strain on our planet, but no one is sure what to do. Again, this video is all about illumination; the revealing of a truth.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig 2.**

Returning to more traditional photography during my second semester, I created *Falling Sky* (fig. 3,10). This image is a staged environment that shows me lying on a bed of AstroTurf, looking up at a false night sky. The sky is made from a dozen or so black light bulbs, with pinpricks of light breaking through, all suspended from a mesh of wire. Again, I wanted to throw our typical idea of physics out the window, so I've placed the whole thing on its side. This also adds a sinister twist to the image, as if the bulbs are springing out to grab the subject of the photograph. This image is, again, all about anxiety and uncertainty in our modern world. It's also about technology, our dependence on it, and the isolation that this may create. This piece was certainly inspired in part by science fiction novels. In a sense, it is a metaphor for our unabashed obsession with technology and our abandonment of nature. It's as if the night sky was
replaced with a technological equivalent. The light bulb is of special significance in this work, as it was the invention of an easily mass producible incandescent light bulb that wiped out the darkness of the night for humanity.

![Image](image_url)

Fig

3.

During my third semester, nature became a more important subject in my work. I found myself becoming very interested in what we define as nature. Manicured lawns became the key symbol for our mistaking something man made for something natural. There is nothing natural about the grass we find in our yards. It is grown on a farm from specialized seeds that are designed to excel in our urban environments. We use chemicals to help it grow and to keep out weeds and insects. Yet, for most people who live in urban areas, this is considered nature. This misconception became the center point of my **Indigenous** series (fig. 5,6). For **Indigenous** I created still lives that speak to our misconceptions, sordid past mistakes, and guilt concerning the natural world. Each image contains a collection of objects that speak to our idealized notions of nature. Every object holds a place of importance within the tableau. The final kicker for each constructed set is that the floor is carpeted with lush green grass. Each image becomes an alter piece to our misconceptions and guilt concerning the natural world.
The Big Dark

For my thesis exhibition, I decided that I wanted to create an immersive environment that would allow the viewer to enter into my concept, rather than having a passive experience of viewing it on the wall. All of the ideas that I had been working with throughout my graduate career would be present. The largest overarching idea, though, would be illumination. Jean Baudrillard once described America as a civilization that is “perhaps as scared to see the lights go out as was the hunter in his primitive night”. I decided that I would turn out the lights on my viewer and allow my work to light the way. The Big Dark (fig 7-11) would be just that- an installation housed in a nearly completely dark space. The only illumination would be coming from the work itself: a series of backlit photographs, a couple of incandescent “beacons”, and a night sky that would be placed at the viewers’ feet. Unseen, but with an unmistakable scent, the floor would be covered in grass.

I strived to create an initial experience that would combine a sense of fear with curiosity and wonder. The viewer enters into a dark space and is instantly transported out of the gallery space and into the unknown. While stripping away sight, the sense of smell is overwhelmed with the scent of grass. The only light visible is emanating from a series of images that are planetary in nature (fig 7). As the eyes begin to adjust and the viewer feels safe enough to venture further into the space, the images are revealed to be of the moon. Upon further inspection these images turn out to be of a moon globe, not the real thing, but instead a mere representation. At this point in the adventure, the ground begins to rise slightly. If the viewer is brave enough to venture up the hill, they
will be greeted with the vastness of space set before their feet (fig. 8), as if they have just walked up to the edge of the earth.

Fig 7.
Fig 8.

To the right of the star field are two beacons of light (fig. 9), the brightest things in the room. Two bright orbs shine through in the darkness, and upon further inquiry will be revealed to house in each of them an incandescent light bulb. Each bulb sends out a spiral image, reminiscent of our DNA’s double helix, out onto the wall behind them as well as onto the chest of any one who approaches the towers. Inside the lenses that make up each orb, the viewer will find captured and repeated continuously the same spiral, a remnant of the filament that burns in each bulb.
In a far corner of the room sits another backlit image. This one is of a man lying on a bed of grass and staring up at the night sky. But this night sky is, in fact, a clear deception, for it is made up of blackened light bulbs with pinpricks of light showing through. *Falling Sky* (fig. 3,10), as described earlier in this paper, is hanging on the back wall to greet the viewer as they leave the star field.
Fig 10.

The final series of images that meets the viewer as they leave *The Big Dark* is *Observe* (fig 1, 11), also described earlier in this paper. The viewer finds this work up and just out of reach, back toward the entrance of the space. These images depict a man caught in the gravity of the artificial moon on the opposite wall, caught up in the counterfeit phases that cycle past him.
All the pieces of the installation work together to form one cohesive phenomenological experience. It is an experience that deprives the sense of sight in order to focus attention on other senses. Three of the more subtle senses invoked by the dark space are those of smell, touch, and sound. This is mostly influenced by the grass in the room. When one enters a dark space there is a tendency to be quiet, in an effort to hear the surroundings and make up for the detriment of sight. The only thing the viewer can hear is the grass underfoot. The viewer also has the unmistakable feeling of walking over grass-covered earth, in sharp contrast to the concrete experienced on the way into the room. Finally, the unmistakable scent of grass takes the viewer outside of the gallery space and, hopefully to some nostalgic place from the past- a place where a bit of fear mixes with a sense of wonder and excitement.
"The Big Dark," simply put, is a metaphor for life’s journey. It works as a metaphor for my own adventure through life. My time spent in the commercial photo industry and the course I set out on to find where I felt I belonged. Beyond this personal metaphor, though, it also has much larger ties. On a much broader scale, humanity often finds itself stumbling around in the dark trying to find its way. We are in a constant struggle to illuminate the shadowy areas of life, trying to get nature to divulge her secrets. Every so often we stumble on something fantastic and awe inspiring, and sometimes, out in the darkness, we find a beacon of light, something to guide our way forward.