

What was it like growing up in Los Angeles during the 50s and 60s?

I was just turning 21 in 1970 so this is a question about my childhood. Anywhere on earth things were of course different, no digital revolution. Once I could drive it was a seemingly infinite matrix of wide-open roads. The air was awful in the summer. Where I lived in the late 60's and most of the 1970's (the west San Fernando Valley) I saw vast areas quickly filling in with tract housing. The only thing for certain was change.

How has it changed and why is it important to your work?

If you are a photographer, and you choose to go out-side, where you are and when you are rather automatically encoded into your work. I have always found the evolving landscape and the light (atmosphere) of Southern California fascinating. My work is an index of who I am, where I am, and when I was.

Tell us about your most recent project?

For the last six years I have been photographing in an abandoned housing area of what was previously George Air Force Base in Victorville California. The George Air Force Base was established in 1941 at the beginning of World War Two and it closed in 1992. The architect, A. Quincy Jones, was hired to design approximately 600 of the housing units in the area that I am photographing, and they were constructed between 1965 and 1972. The base was closed in 1992 and due to ground water contamination and the housing units were abandoned and have been left to deteriorate since that time.

At some point tractors have moved through the site clearing between the buildings pushing aside trees and ground cover. This action, undertaken with such complete disregard for the structures, has resulted in a unique physical site with surprising juxtapositions and textures. Most of architecture, while on the edge of generic, is subtly modernist and distinct with hundreds of the same-sized large vacant windows opening to mute spatial volumes.

This site is a rich opportunity for material and atmospheric observation. I have a longstanding interest sites involved in a linear deterioration in the context of a cyclical atmospheric environment. The site has an equally compelling social history as an artifact of the militarization of the desert west in the United States during the cold war and its current status as a superfund clean-up site.

The militarization of the Southwest came roaring out of WW II with a heady confidence from having banished the Axis threat and with the looming common enemy of the "Commie Menace." George Air Base was part of that momentum and enterprise. It has been said that with photography content is automatic. It is, after all, always a photograph of something. I am, of course, interested in what that something is, however, what that something might mean is always a complex issue. Photographs are recording of the light bouncing off the outside of things. They are in all regards superficial. I should not be surprised is I looked up superficial in the dictionary and found "like a photograph."

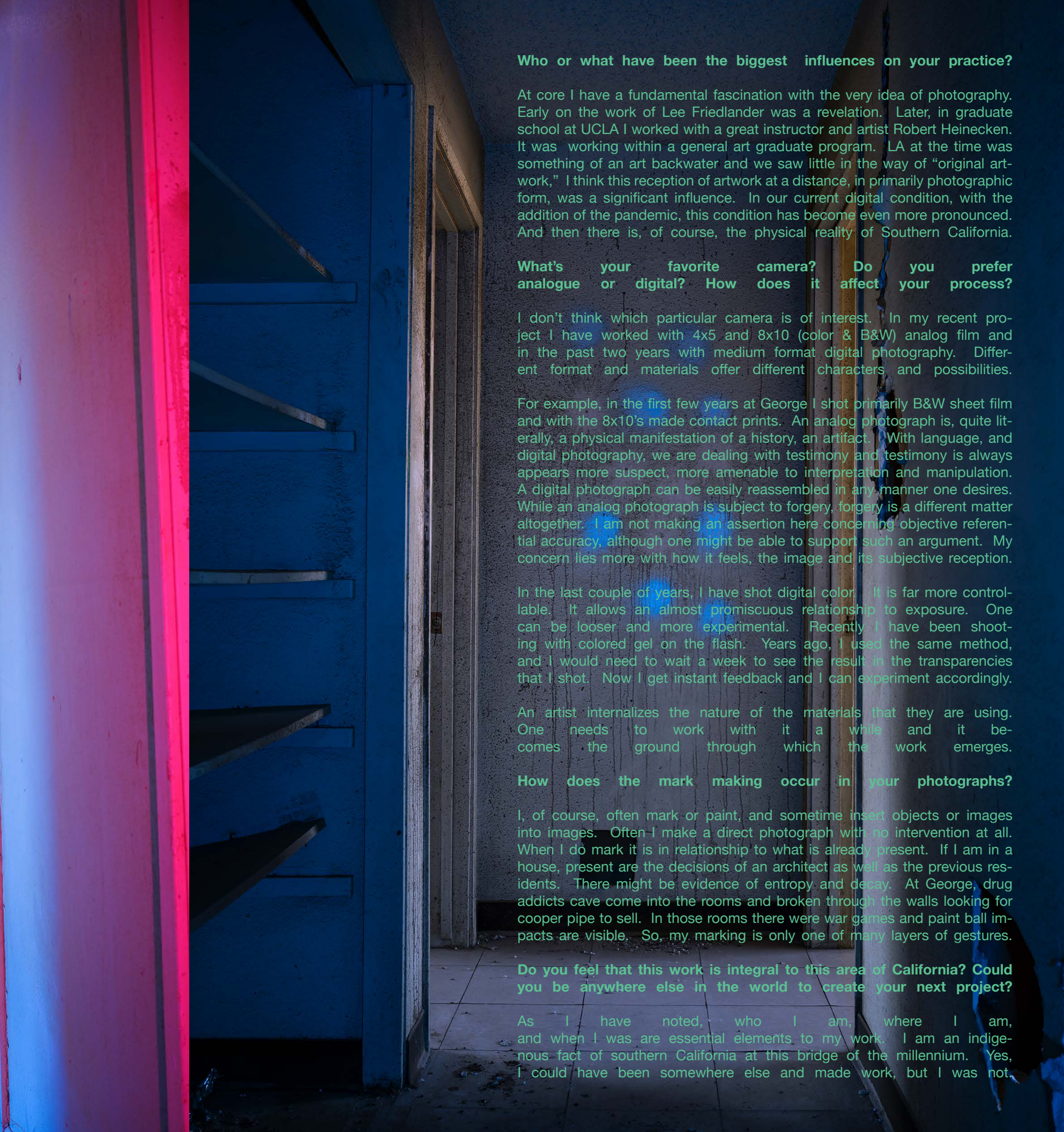
With this observation in mind, I have come to see in this work a metaphor for the dawning of the Anthropocene. When I was a boy I read a science fiction novel about an archeologist who worked on a planet completely covered with structures built upon structures. The scientist of that Civilization struggling to understand their past from the ruins. A surprise twist problematizes their assumptions.

I have always been drawn to the indexical nature of photographs and the observation that they are imprints of a specific time, place, and circumstance. Where possible, I have attempted to emphasize this by sequencing the photographs chronologically. Photographs can accommodate a broad range of interpretations, from the concretely informational, social, political, esthetic, as well as an index of a specific life and its engagements. I aspire to embrace that messy complexity. It is my experience that I can tangentially glimpse the existential and my reactions oscillate at the extremes between wonder and terror.

B e i n g

J o h n

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Who or what have been the biggest influences on your practice?

At core I have a fundamental fascination with the very idea of photography. Early on the work of Lee Friedlander was a revelation. Later, in graduate school at UCLA I worked with a great instructor and artist Robert Heinecken. It was working within a general art graduate program. LA at the time was something of an art backwater and we saw little in the way of "original artwork." I think this reception of artwork at a distance, in primarily photographic form, was a significant influence. In our current digital condition, with the addition of the pandemic, this condition has become even more pronounced. And then there is, of course, the physical reality of Southern California.

What's your favorite camera? Do you prefer analogue or digital? How does it affect your process?

I don't think which particular camera is of interest. In my recent project I have worked with 4x5 and 8x10 (color & B&W) analog film and in the past two years with medium format digital photography. Different format and materials offer different characters and possibilities.

For example, in the first few years at George I shot primarily B&W sheet film and with the 8x10's made contact prints. An analog photograph is, quite literally, a physical manifestation of a history, an artifact. With language, and digital photography, we are dealing with testimony and testimony is always appears more suspect, more amenable to interpretation and manipulation. A digital photograph can be easily reassembled in any manner one desires. While an analog photograph is subject to forgery, forgery is a different matter altogether. I am not making an assertion here concerning objective referential accuracy, although one might be able to support such an argument. My concern lies more with how it feels, the image and its subjective reception.

In the last couple of years, I have shot digital color. It is far more controllable. It allows an almost promiscuous relationship to exposure. One can be looser and more experimental. Recently I have been shooting with colored gel on the flash. Years ago, I used the same method, and I would need to wait a week to see the result in the transparencies that I shot. Now I get instant feedback and I can experiment accordingly.

An artist internalizes the nature of the materials that they are using. One needs to work with it a while and it becomes the ground through which the work emerges.

How does the mark making occur in your photographs?

I, of course, often mark or paint, and sometime insert objects or images into images. Often I make a direct photograph with no intervention at all. When I do mark it is in relationship to what is already present. If I am in a house, present are the decisions of an architect as well as the previous residents. There might be evidence of entropy and decay. At George, drug addicts cave come into the rooms and broken through the walls looking for cooper pipe to sell. In those rooms there were war games and paint ball impacts are visible. So, my marking is only one of many layers of gestures.

Do you feel that this work is integral to this area of California? Could you be anywhere else in the world to create your next project?

As I have noted, who I am, where I am, and when I was are essential elements to my work. I am an indigenous fact of southern California at this bridge of the millennium. Yes, I could have been somewhere else and made work, but I was not.







45x96"
2/4-10

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