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Pollataggle: An Exhibition and Photo Book

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Pollataggle: An Exhibition and Photo Book

Kaitrin Acuna

University Scholar and Honors Thesis

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The following is an examination of my thesis work, which is a series of photographs entitled *Pollataggle*. All of the images in this body of work can be viewed at KaitrinAcuna.com, or in person at the VAIS Gallery in the UConn Art Building until the end of the Spring 2015 semester. The imagery, as opposed to the writing, is to be considered the thesis work itself.

Amusingly, this body of work grew out of being entirely exasperated with another body of work I had been pursuing. I had initially been creating a series based on synesthesia, a condition where unusual perception results in blended senses. I am still entirely marveled by the concept of synesthesia, and am certain my artwork will return to it in the near future. At the time however, I had been working on various facets of synesthesia projects for the past three years, and was itching to pursue something else. I am immensely glad that I did, and that I was given the opportunity to change my project’s main focus. I found that the body of work I was able to create was both rewarding and the largest series I have created yet.

I shifted from investigating studies on perception in a literal sense, to more of an open ended figurative sense. I have always been interested in imagination and stories that fascinate us as children, or as imaginative adults. There is a beauty in childlike imagination; it is whimsical, unquestioning, and unapologetic. I know many
adults who have lost these qualities to their imagination. The ones who have kept them make the art I currently admire most.

With these ideas in mind, I was interested in revisiting my own childhood fascinations. From toddlerhood on, I was enamored with anything to do with faeries. Tales of Tiny Folks and Borrowers were enough to have me building my own miniature faerie houses and gardens in my yard. Patches of moss were imagined to be faerie beds and leaves would be perfect seats, hammocks, or boats.

My grandmother added to this fascination, forever telling me stories, helping me build tiny houses, and constantly adding to my arsenal of tales of faerie mythology. I have vivid memories of being four years old and pulling chunks of ice out of the late-winter ground, and having my granma inform me that they were faerie castles.

These stories came back to me quite a bit while I spent a semester abroad in Ireland. The folklore there indeed sparked these memories, but it was more so the environment that did it. The forests were teeming with dense moss that crawled from the twigs at the top of the trees and down to the roots that protruded from the earth. The entire island was full of places that appeared to be off the pages of the storybooks that I adored when I was young.

When I returned home from Ireland, I found myself more aware of my own environment. When it's not bitter-New-England-cold outside, I spend a fair amount
of my time wandering around the woods. As a photographer, I typically have my camera with me. New England woods look far less enticing than Irish woods to me, but I began to notice that the smaller patches of lush moss looked like scattered patches of Ireland.

I started photographing these tiny moments with shallow depths of field. This means I used a lens with a small aperture—around f/1.8. This results in blurry backgrounds of the photos, leaving the moss or leaves as the central focus of the image. This allowed me to photograph these scenes with a skewed sense of scale. With no trees looming in the background, patches of moss could be mistaken for mountains if one looked quick enough.

On a whim, I decided I wanted to try placing myself as a subject within these nature shots. I put my camera on a timer, posed, and then pulled the photos both into
photoshop. I selected myself from the photo, scaled it down, and placed myself within the frame of the mossy log.

I suddenly had a tangible visualization of the stories I was so infatuated with as a child. I was addicted to the idea and began to shoot more.

The key part of this process was trying to create images that looked physically believable. I do not expect anyone to see my images and think there’s actually a tiny person there, defying all logic and making childhood dreams come true--but I don’t want my viewers to be distracted by a poor photoshop job. I want my images to come across as seamless creations.

Over time, my process of creating these became more refined. I learned to match the lighting of my ‘pose photo’ with the lighting of my ‘background photo’ using levels, curves, and color balance adjustment layers in photoshop. I became more aware of the subtleties in lighting throughout the day, and throughout the seasons. I can now tell by looking at a photo of a patch of grass in daylight, roughly what time of day and time of year it was taken at. Spring light looks different than winter light. Noon light appears drastically different than evening light. Traits such as warmth, harshness, contrast, and direction of the shadows, are all qualities I am far more in tune with now.
Creating artificial shadows in Photoshop was also a key element of constructing the believability aspect in my photographs. When I put myself into the background images as a Tiny Folk, as I decided to call them, my body would block light if I had actually been present in the scene. As a result of needing to concoct these false shadows, I found myself paying more attention to how shadows function, blur, overlap, stretch, and change throughout the day. I was able to artificially add shadows in Photoshop using brushes and blur tools.

I began shooting these images with a Canon Mark II camera, which is a full frame, digital single lens reflex camera. Full frame cameras, as opposed to cropped cameras, allow more of an area of a scene into a camera, and typically at a higher quality than their cropped counterparts. At first, I shot many of these images with a
50mm 1.8 lens, which worked well for many of the images. During some critiques with professors however, several people brought up that the way in which this particular lens rendered its background blur was distracting. The blur bokeh was a bit too ‘chunky’ as one professor put it. Fortunately, with the IDEA grant I was able to purchase a 70-200 f/2.8 lens, which produced lens compression with beautiful creamy results. This difference gave the photos variety, and in the end I do not favor one style over another, but like that the images do not have a strictly repetitive quality.

To further add to this variety in image quality, I desired a lens that would not zoom in so close. The 70-200mm lens did not allow for me to include some photos in locations that I really wanted hoped to. For example, there is a thicket of moss
surrounded by trees growing densely near one another. With the 70-200mm lens, I am not able to physically nor logistically (due to the zoom) create a picture of this area. Fortunately with the IDEA grant, I was able to pursue these areas of my project with a 28-74mm lens, which is small enough and wide angle enough for me to accomplish the rest of my images.

![Image of a person lying on mossy ground surrounded by trees.]

I was also able to switch from using my camera’s self timer to using a remote shutter release. Since I was creating self portraiture, I had to use a device to take images of myself. With the self timer, I would manually press the shutter, run in front of the camera to pose, and run back after the camera took the image. With the remote shutter release however, I was able to put the camera on a 2 second timer, hit the remote button, hide the remote, pose, and repeat. There was no tiresome running
back and forth between behind the camera and in front of it. This was a much more efficient way to work.

In the end my series resulted in around 25 images of these tiny folks. My character commenced in a variety of activities in a variety of locations. She sailed a ship made from oak leaves, built a fort from birch leaves, trekked up a mossy mountain, and 22 other endeavors. This had been a fantastic way to revisit this era of stories from my childhood.

With my 25 images, I was able to create a photo book. It was less complex than I anticipated to sequence the images in an order I was pleased with. I eventually decided that I did not want these images to have any set narrative, but to allow my audience to perhaps concoct their own. I sequenced the images based on their color and pose. For example, I wouldn’t want two purple images next to each other, or two images juxtaposed where I’m positioned very similarly.

My exhibition was a more difficult process. I still sequenced images based on color and pose, but I had to cut out around ten images. I only had 14 frames. I eventually decided on the 14 strongest images and printed them.

As opposed to using a lab to do my printing, I do all my own printing through the art department’s Digital Art Services Lab, or DASL I used Epson luster paper, which has a slight sheen, and printed using an Epson Pro4880 and Pro9880 printers. These
printers are unmatched in print quality. The papers and inks I used are archival, meaning they will not start to fade for 200 years. I printed each image as a 14x21 inch inkjet print.

The frames I had in mind were rustic wood, but still sleek and finished enough to appear professional in a gallery. I was able to describe what I had in mind to a framer on etsy.com, and had all 14 frames custom sized and created. I had settled on floating frames, where the prints would rest suspended in between two sheets of Plexiglas. This gives the effect of a float, with no mat and several inches between the edge of the print and the inner edge of the frame. The greatest challenge was aligning each print within the glass as a perfectly centered image. This took about six hours in total.

Physically hanging the frames was surprisingly, an easier task. Professor Ray DiCapua helped me to create a template to space the frames throughout the walls, and I used a laser level to ensure the height of my images and artist statement were consistent. I also learned how to seamlessly repair holes in the gallery walls with spackle, a sander, and paint. There were several instances where I mis-hammered a nail into the wrong location, and being able to mend the walls was crucial to the integrity of the space.
The opening for Pollataggle was a success overall. It was beautifully nostalgic to exhibit in the space of Room 109, now the VAIS Gallery. Three years ago, I exhibited my first opening with a fellow student Brooke Foti, back when the gallery had bricked walls and linoleum floors. As a result of our 2012 opening, Translucence, the art department received funding to turn the space into a student gallery. Being able to exhibit in the space again was wonderful.

There was a steady stream of visitors throughout the night, including several people I had never met, which is always a goal. The most interesting part of the opening was that most people had their own specific narratives from their own childhoods,
associated with the images. I enjoyed the unexpected variety. I am also happy to report that I have sold several prints from the opening, which is always a goal of any student hoping to pursue a career as a professional artist.

Moving forward, I am excited to continue to make work that references the unreal, but remains personal to me. I have realized over my last year in the UConn art program why I think it is that photography appeals to me so greatly.

Before becoming a visual artist, I had been a writer. The types of stories I wrote are actually quite comparable to the content of the images I make. I am fascinated with the surreal and the dreamlike. I typically never finish anything I write, however. I stop part way through, or allow the end of the story to exist for several years in my head alone, without returning to it.

Photography is a way for me to pull moments and snippets from these narratives, and create them as tangible imagery. Even if I don’t have all parts of a story finished or present in a series of images, it does not come across as incomplete—because it isn’t. The way images function often allow viewers to create their own narratives based on what they see. I adore this, and I believe it may be part of the reason I was so very attracted to photography when I originally decided to investigate it as a career.
I feel that after four years, I finally have the answers to how to begin a career as a professional artist. This was always a rather blurry area for me, and many others. So often I was asked the question, “Um, what are you going to do with an art degree?” Now I can answer that intended-to-be-belittling question with professionalism and confidence, “I am going to be an artist.” And I am going to be able to support myself and be ridiculously happy and fulfilled making art for a living.

The business of fine art is a rather elusive, but an absolutely present and fascinating one. There is an entire market for fine art, for everything from image licensing to interior design dealers. There are entire specific markets that I had no idea even existed until a few years ago. Residences, grants, galleries, dealers, editions, stock licensing, commissions, portfolio reviews, and sales are no longer foreign concepts to me.

Most relevantly to this project, I have been creating Tiny Folk images for client’s children, and will continue to do this as part of my business for the next year. I have taken several incredibly helpful photography business courses online over the past few semesters, and I have started a business specializing in unique portraiture. In addition to this, I will be launching a global kickstarter campaign for a project on Alopecia, an autoimmune hairloss disorder, in which I am in charge of the photobook portion. Pollataggle will no doubt help me create effective imagery and inform my process of this new project. I will also be contacting as many relevant galleries as possible, with the hopes of being accepted for a show or gaining
representation for my artwork. I will continue to sell editions of my prints and create commissioned imagery for my clients. I plan to pursue my MFA in photography in the next few years.

And above all, I am thrilled to keep making art. There is no life I would rather have, and nothing I would rather be doing.