Reconstructions: The contemporary Southern landscape by its photographers

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Reconstructions: The Contemporary Southern Landscape by Its Photographers

by

Natalie Kersey Gillis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Reconstructions: the Contemporary Southern Landscape by its Photographers

Natalie Kersey Gillis

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the work of landscape photographers living and working in the Southern region of the United States and to explore what their images visually communicate about their relationship to the Southern land and its distinctive history. This objective is accomplished through an analysis of the work of three contemporary landscape photographers who reside in the South, and work primarily within their local hometowns.

This thesis examines the work of photographers William Christenberry, Sally Mann, and John McWilliams. Each is a photographer who is native to the American South and has used his or her indigenous Southern landscapes as subject matter. These photographers’ work not only articulates the connection between the artist and the land in and on which they have lived, but also provides social and political commentary on the South’s struggle to maintain its identity while grappling with its haunting past.

The research for this thesis has been derived from primary sources, including the artists’ images, museum and gallery exhibitions and published writings. A “reading” (as defined by Alan Trachtenburg) of individual images is used as support for the central argument, as well as discussion of a photographer’s work as a whole. Interviews with the photographers in academic, popular and trade publications were also used. Historical and
academic literature on Southern history and culture is used as reference in order to provide a framework in which the photographers’ work is positioned. Photographers who are native to the South are particularly adept at portraying the region’s distinctive culture and growing pains as it struggles to come to terms with an ever-changing America. Images of the South by natives of the region are noteworthy because they are imbued with the artist’s own individual emotions about their land and their history. Southerners are an American demographic who feel a distinct tie to the land from whence they came. Therefore, Southern landscape photography offers its viewer a gateway through which to explore this complex relationship between landscape, home and history.
Chapter One: The American Land Through the Lens

The American Landscape as Symbol

The landscape has captivated the imaginations of the American people since the country’s settlement. In a new country in a search for history, icons or heroes to bolster the identity of its citizens, the land became the symbol of the American spirit. Painter Thomas Cole captured the essence of America’s unique landscape in a lecture given in 1835. Cole proclaimed, “…the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness…those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched” (Philips in Betsky, et al, 1996, p.15). The landscape gave this fledgling country a sense of identity and became the most American of symbols. It has been called our nation’s “special endowment.” Its development and settlement, Americans’ Manifest Destiny, became a motivator for the pioneers of this great land. From these earliest days of Western exploration and expansion, photographers have been on scene to document the landscape and present it to the rest of the nation. The work of nineteenth-century photographers such as William Henry Jackson, Carleton Watkins and Timothy O’Sullivan, echoed these ideas about the American landscape soon after the inception of photography itself in 1839, and helped define Americans’ perception of their new nation.
The Southern Landscape as Symbol

While the majority of Americans have found other symbols to which to pledge their allegiance as the nation has matured, Americans from the Southern states still maintain a strong relationship to the land of their region. “…the mythic theme of place and community posits a vision of the South as ‘sacred ground,’ creating special relationships…between people and place” (Smith, 1985, p. 116). For many Southerners, the land is the lifeblood of their survival. It is the place they were born and will always belong to. The South has historically been an agricultural region, making the land that central locus from which all life springs. Historian Harlan Davidson stated, “…the land has represented a rootedness from which all other cultural elements – ties to family, religion, place and people – followed naturally” (1987, p. 196).

The land has sustained its citizens physically and financially. For many Southerners, the land also sustains them emotionally. Southern photographer William Christenberry said, “I’m proud of being from the South. I’m proud of the way I was raised with ties to the landscape…It’s what I know, and what I care deeply about” (in Feaster, 2006, para. 3). Although this emotional response to the American landscape has its roots in the era of exploration of the 1800’s, in the 20th and 21st centuries, this trait seems to be one that has become uniquely Southern and contributes to the region’s distinctiveness. As Willie Morris stated in Good Old Boy: A Delta Boyhood, Southerners have “an allegiance and love for one small place” (in Dugan, 1996, p.14).

Indeed, Americans born or living in the Southern region of the United States see themselves as a demographic set apart from the rest of the country’s citizens. It has been argued that as technology and industry advances, and people move more fluidly from one
region to another, that the South has become “homogenized,” and no longer possesses the traits which once distinguished it from the rest of the United States (Egerton, 1974). However, “Southerners…seem to have felt that the South was somehow distinctive, and they have been just as ready to admit that distinctiveness as others outside the region” (Smith, 1985, p. 94). In fact, in the majority, Southerners’ dialect, social customs, diet, genealogical ties and political and religious practices do fundamentally differ from those of Americans living north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Furthermore, the South is also the only region of the United States to have experienced both massive wealth and massive poverty, according to historian C. Vann Woodward in his seminal work *The Burden of Southern History* (1968). In a country that values strength and virility, the South has been defeated both economically and militarily. In a land of innocence and purity, the South has had to shoulder the guilt of slavery (Woodward, 1968). Southerners have struggled to survive since the inception of this nation. It is, perhaps, those years of struggle to work and defend the land which they claim as theirs that makes Southerners so devoted to that land.

*The Southern Landscape Documented*

“The special history and geography of the South clearly set it apart in ways that frequently spill over into art” (Freehling, et al, 1986, p. 3). Artistic representations of the landscape of the South can provide remarkable insight into the complex relationship Southerners have with their land. Images of the South by natives of the region are particularly noteworthy because they are permeated with the artists’ own individual emotions about their homeland and their history. Photographer William Christenberry said, “I know there are other places…but Alabama is where my heart is” (in Grundberg,
Specifically, for native-born Southern photographers, the land is often a subject matter imbued with a great sense of passion and pride, as well as nostalgia, sadness and longing. In the words of Theodore Rosengarten, “For better and for worse, the South has not kept up with the rest of the nation” (in McWilliams, 1989, p. 5). Rosengarten made this statement in his introduction to John McWilliams’ book of photographs of Southern landscapes, *Land of Deepest Shade*. For photographers like McWilliams, Christenberry, and Sally Mann, who were working in the second half of the twentieth century, the Southern landscape is haunted not only with the mythology of moonlight and magnolias, but also the realities of Civil War, Reconstruction, Civil Rights, industrialization and a New South struggling to recapture its regional identity and sense of place within a new, unified America.

It was in the 1930s that the South was systematically “photographed, scrutinized and stereotyped” (Clayton and Salmond, 1987, p. 189). Like the images of the early American landscape by Jackson and O’Sullivan, the resulting photographic images by members of the FSA photography project have both informed the nation at large what the South is, as well as informed Southerners themselves what it meant to be from the South. However, as Burl Noggle pointed out, all of the FSA photographers who produced those images were “outsiders” (in Clayton and Salmond, 1987, p. 189). “The term ‘outsider’ calls attention to a significant fact: much of the great photographic documentation of the South in the thirties was the work of artists who were neither native to or residents of the South” (Clayton and Salmond, 1987, p.189). In Noggles’ essay about the FSA photographs, he even went on to suggest that the Yankee photographers’ motivations may have been, in part, “to expose or reveal some shortcoming or to perpetuate regional
stereotypes or hostilities” (Clayton and Salmond, 1987, p.189). This practice is not limited to the FSA photographs. The practice of “south-watching” by outsiders attempting to depict Southern culture to the world continued into the 1970s. In his book *Myth, Media and the Southern Mind*, Stephen Smith quotes Mike Ryoko, of Chicago newspaper fame, who observed, “Thanks to Jimmy Carter, the journalistic trend-seekers and social scientists have discovered the South. They are now going to explain the Southerner to himself…” (1985, p. 98). Southerners have responded, with literature, art and both academic and popular publications in which they present and define themselves. In the second half of that same century which produced the slanted FSA images, native Southern photographers have answered those works with their own images which document and attempt to capture that atmosphere of place they know, presented in a way only they can.
In her book, *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard states that when she asked twenty university students to “name a place where they felt they belonged, most could not” (Lippard, 1997, p. 9). Surely, that group of students did not include any Southerners. John Shelton Reed, after sifting through copious amounts of census data, computer printouts and decades of public opinion polls…ascertained that “Southerners seem more likely than other Americans to think of their region, their states, their local communities, as *theirs*, and as distinct from and preferable to other regions, states, and localities” (in Smith, 1985, p. 96). Mississippi Congressman Frank Smith has been quoted as saying, “Southerners have a sense of identity with place that is only slightly less compelling than our identity with family. It is one of the distinctions that still separates our section from the rest of the country” (in Smith, 1985, p. 116). In order to fully explore this distinct and complex relationship a Southerner has for his homeland, it is advantageous to first discuss what else makes the South itself distinct as a region.

*The South Geographically*

Many chroniclers of Southern history and culture have argued over what parameters define the region of America referred to as the “South.” Geographically, the South has been defined since roughly the time of the American Revolution as Maryland and anything south of it. While there has been not been a definitive consensus reached on the exact parameters which make the region distinctive, scholars have agreed that there is
a place of America called “the South” and a sub-group of Americans referred to as “Southerners.” Climate, environment, demographics, economy, agriculture and the social culture and heritage of its people are all crosscurrents which have been studied as potential contributors to the region’s idiosyncratic way of life.

The first of these is climate. The South is largely thought to be a place of extreme heat, humidity, and sunlight with very little or no cold, frost or significantly wintry conditions. Sociologist Ellsworth Huntington said that it was this heat and climate that contributed to the South’s inhabitants’ lethargy and laziness. He referred to this phenomenon as “environmental determinism” – a theory he derived from Social Darwinism (1924). Likewise, scholar Ulrich Phillips argued a version of this theory, calling it “climatic determinism” (1929). Phillips proposed that the intense and unrelenting heat in the South led to Southerners’ frequent need to rest from work and take vacations to conserve energy that the climate depleted, thus contributing to the stereotype of the lazy and indolent citizen. This “slow” approach to work and moving through their day also crept into a slow manner of speech, making them appear uneducated or slow mentally. The hot climate also contributed to a higher incidence of illness and disease, thus making the Southerner appear weak and unhealthy (Phillips, 1929).

The South Demographically

The demographics of the people living in the South also differentiate them as a group from Americans inhabiting other regions of the country. Southerners have been polled to have the lowest income and educational level per capita and are employed in agricultural jobs in significantly higher numbers (Vance, 1945). Most Southerners live in fewer, smaller towns in which the primary religious affiliation is Protestant. However, by
far, race has set the South apart more than any other demographic marker. The largest majority of the African-American population prior to the Civil War was found in the South. Up to ninety percent of the country’s African-Americans occupied this region. The South’s relationship to this race, however, was a precarious and often violent one. It is perhaps this relationship between black and white Southerner that has most lastingly defined the region, as well as served to isolate it.

*The Civil War and Reconstruction*

Southern photographer Sally Mann said in her book of Southern landscape photographs, *Deep South*, “Living in the South often means slipping out of temporal joint, a peculiar phenomenon that I find both nourishes and wounds. To identify a person as a Southerner suggests not only that her history is inescapable and formative but that it is also impossibly present” (Mann, 2005, p. 7). The South’s unique distinction as the only American region to have been militarily occupied is one its residents cannot seem to escape. It is irrefutable that the Civil War decimated the South. As C. Vann Woodward argued, in a country that values strength, virility and morality, the South was defeated militarily, economically and socially (1960). The myths of the plantation culture and its chivalrous, paternalistic land-owners, happy hard-working slaves and lily-white, virtuous Southern Belles were exposed; and the realities of the institution were laid bare. The South struggled to re-build and re-define itself while still holding on to some of those myths and holding onto its sense of place. One of the only symbols of the former Southern way of life left unscathed for the Southerner was the land.

From the plantation paradigm to Cash’s version of Turner’s frontier thesis, the sense of place has been a prominent part of the history and social reality in the South. . . .Henry Grady and his cohorts in the first New South movement called for
industrialization, urbanization and exploitation of the South’s resources, both natural and human, with a vision of progress that seemed almost revolutionary; fifty years later the Vanderbilt Agrarians contended that the True South was actually a land of bucolic farmers with small agricultural units divided by pristine wilderness areas, a vision of reality that was labeled reactionary. Today, neither of these visions is controlling in the mythology of place. The contemporary South has developed a new mythic vision which draws from elements of both and which continues the theme of place and community that has always captivated the region’s people and engendered a strong attachment to the South (Smith, 1985, pg. 117).

The New South

Although the New South faced the unavoidable arrival of industrialization, it came slowly to the region and was often resisted. After the Civil War, the South faced a monumental dilemma. Should it rebuild itself in the likeness of its former archetype, or forge ahead to craft a new, industrial culture? Men such as Jefferson Davis, first president of the Confederacy, wanted a model of the Old South and continued to deride the pioneering ways of the North. Others like Robert E. Lee, however, understood that the path to the New South included technological advancement and supported the teaching of subjects such as chemistry and engineering at Washington College. He proposed that the future leaders of the South would need this education in order to recognize and solve the problems an advancing South was sure to face. Francis Dawson and Henry Grady, like Lee, saw that the path to a New South must, indeed, be a new one. Grady espoused three tenets for the creators of the New South to follow. First, the South must repudiate slavery. Second, it must reconcile itself politically and economically with the North; and third, the South must diversify it population by attracting immigrants, particularly from the North (Gaston, 1970).
However, the South’s attempts at industrialization did not serve its people or its land. Because the region did not have the money to finance industrialization, it began trading its assets - namely land, railroads, iron, steel, textiles, lumber and labor - in order to attract Northern investment. This only served to facilitate Northern control of Southern resources and labor – an unwelcome alternative (Daniel, 1972). The abolition of slavery also left the Southerner with the dilemma of how to work and profit from its land. The solution was also an unproductive one. In fact, agriculture and its mode of operation was still functioning much like it had before the war. The grand, sprawling plantations may have been gone, but, effectively, the plantation system remained intact. There were simply more, smaller farms being worked. Since the white land-owners did not have money to pay laborers after the war wiped them out, the freed slaves did not have the opportunity to earn a living. Another way to get the freed slave and master back together was devised, namely, tenancy and share-cropping. This system turned out to be “worse than slavery” (to quote author David Oshinsky’s 1996 book of the same name) because it gave the impression that ex-slaves were working the land themselves when, in fact, a system of peonage was established that kept them perpetually in debt to the land owner. Most importantly, the system significantly contributed to the slow economic recovery of the South because it did not provide the farmers with an incentive to advance their agricultural practices (Daniel, 1972).
Chapter Three: Reconstructing the Southern Image

The New Deal and the Farm Security Administration

By the time President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the New Deal’s Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, and the Resettlement Administration in 1935, the South had become “the nation’s number one economic problem” as declared by Roosevelt (in Clayton and Salmond, 1987, p. 194). “In that decade, the South more than any other region found itself photographed, stereotyped and scrutinized” (Clayton and Salmond, 1987, p. 189). Roy Stryker headed the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration and was charged with, among other things, providing images of the administration’s programs at work. However, because the purpose of the Historical Section was to serve as a “visual explicator of various New Deal programs to aid poor farmers…the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration dealt with the poorest elements of society…Blacks, sharecroppers and mountaineers. The Historical Section photographed these groups, forgot the rest and called the result a portrait of the South” (Watkins, 1982, p. 280). There were few to no images of a metropolitan, middle-class or upper-class Southern population included in the FSA collection, save Walker Evans’ focus on the emerging urban areas (Daniel, 1987). However, the photographers themselves were from urban areas and their careers were spent largely photographing those types of environments. Charles Watkins’ 1982 dissertation, The Blurred Image: Documentary Photography and the Depression South,
discusses in great detail this gaping hole the FSA photographers left in their chronicle of Southern life. Watkins suggests that, “Instead of dealing with the South on its own terms, the photographers solved their problems by creating a South, really several Souths, that could be approached with the skills and attitudes they had at hand” (1982, p. 180). FSA Photographer Carl Mydans supports this presumption when he said, “I had never been to the South before and it fascinated me. It was largely agricultural, and I found it romantic and absorbing. But it also proved to be a difficult region to photograph” (in Watkins, 1982, p. 178). As a result, images of a poor, uneducated, dilapidated and decaying South flooded the American media and the American mind. That image, a non-native image, became the national image for decades until indigenous artists began to publish work from their own point of view and take back the South’s representation.

*The South in Media*

In the 1970’s, southern media and southern artists began to reclaim and reconstruct their regional identity. Until that time, the South was defined largely in terms of antiquated but widely circulated stereotypes – the cavalier, the Southern belle, the African-American slave, the sharecropper. Southern writers, journalists and artists began a movement to re-define these stereotypes and thereby redefine Southern identity. “The editors of *Southern Exposure* …complained ‘Throughout the country, and even in this region, people view the South through myth and stereotype. It’s not surprising. If they turn to newspapers, to television and radio, to popular films and magazines, to most history books and folklore, they encounter these distortions’” (Smith, 1985, p. 98). The publishers of *Southern Exposures*, felt “it takes a publication of the South to present the region as it really is…” (Smith, 1985, p.99). This idea was echoed by other media and
cultural outlets, as well as politicians. During that time politically, finding a way to advance in a rapidly developing industrial and technological America was a focus of many Southern legislators and leaders. Stephen Smith said of this movement, “One of the most effective ways of developing a cultural myth is through public discussions of the nature of the future and that has been a method characteristic of Southern mythmakers almost as strong as their tendency toward discussion of the past” (1985, p. 120). There was a conscious initiative towards shaping the future of the South in such a way so as to preserve some of the region’s cultural distinctiveness, mythical or not. Keeping the land intact and not over-populated or over-built, thereby helping to preserve the Southerner’s sense of place, became an objective of this movement. “…The contemporary vision of the South gave special emphasis to the interrelationship between place and community and recognized the possible impact of change upon the values inherent in the Southerner’s sense of place” (Smith, 1985, p. 121). The Southern land became a central focus politically and culturally during this time. There was a realization that how this land would change and develop was vitally important to the preservation of Southern culture and identity. In fact, the 1974 Commission on the Future of the South “declared one of its primary objectives of regional growth management to be ‘to preserve and enhance, in meeting the issues of growth and change, the human sense of place and community that is a vital element of the unique quality of Southern life’” (Smith, 1985, p. 122). Photographers William Christenberry and John McWilliams were both working at this time to record evidence of this struggle with regional growth. Their images deal photographically with this theme.
The South in Art

Southern photographers began to document their landscape not only to preserve that sense of place, but to claim it, present it to the nation and world, and document what was happening to it, or what was not happening to it. Each artist imbued their work with their own feelings about the land and how the passage of time had affected it and its traditions.

In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard states that as a writer on visual arts, “I’ve spent a lot of my life looking…but less of it looking around, or around here” (1997, p.5). The photographers surveyed in this thesis devoted a large part of their artistic vision to looking solely “around here” or around their homelands, their unique local place.

Lippard states in her book she is concerned “…with the historical narrative as it is written in the landscape or place by the people who lived or live there,” and explains this is of value because, “Inherent in the local is the concept of place – a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar” (1997, pg. 7) That is what photographers like Sally Mann, William Christenberry and John McWilliams give their viewer – a look at their “place” from the inside. Their images are not just pretty pictures, snapshots of a Southern scene to frame and hang on the wall; they are cultural documents informed by the collective history of not only the artist himself, but of generations of his or her family and community.

In a 1998 essay for *Aperture* magazine, Lippard proposes, “Perhaps the only lay people who are really able to interpret social landscapes are locals – those who can recognize subtleties of change within a place over time, who know what the lumps and bumps once were, and what has replaced them” (1998, p. 60). This is exactly the theme
photographers like Christenberry, Mann and McWilliams are grappling with. Each artist has devoted a large amount of their body of work to capturing on film the landscape of the local places they inhabit. The focus of each artist is, in part, to come to terms with that landscape and, through it, come to terms with the history of the South, which is also their personal history.
Chapter Four: The Southern Land through the Lens

_William Christenberry_

“Whenever someone asks why I always photograph in Alabama, I have to answer that, yes, I know there are other places, but Alabama is where my heart is” (in Grundberg, 2001, p. 58).

“William Christenberry has contributed to every major movement in the visual arts from the 1960s to the present” (Hood in Christenberry, 2007, p. 1). He is an artist who has devoted the entirety of the body of his work to exploring his relationship to the landscape of his homeland, Hale County, Alabama. “I’m deeply involved in caring about where I’m from – the site, the place – and all of my work comes out of that place, the positive and the negative” (Williams, 2008, para. 2) Christenberry speaks generously and openly about the influence being from the South has had on his work. “It became clear to me early on – in the ‘50s – that I wanted to find a way to come to grips with the Southern landscape. Not just the trees and the vistas, but the makeup of the place, both the positive side and the negative side” (Christenberry in “Art and Soul,” 2008, para. 2). When asked why he has not worked anywhere else, Christenberry said, “This is and always will be where my heart is. It is what I care about. Everything I want to say through my work comes out of my feelings about that place…to paraphrase William Faulkner, ‘There is enough to write about on this little stamp-sized state…to occupy me all of my life” (in Hirsch, 2005, para. 5).
Biography. William Christenberry was born November 5, 1936 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He is a photographer, painter, drawer and sculptor. Christenberry received his Bachelor’s degree in fine arts in 1958 from the University of Alabama, and his Master’s degree the following year from the same institution. Christenberry’s original concentration was drawing and painting. During his study of those mediums, he was a student of renowned abstract expressionist Melville Price. After graduating, Christenberry accepted a faculty position at the University of Alabama and spent a short time teaching there. He left Alabama for New York in 1960, at the suggestion of a colleague. Although Christenberry would only live in the city briefly, it would turn out to be a life-changing experience, for it was there he met FSA photographer and author Walker Evans. 1936, the year Christenberry was born, James Agee and Evans were in Hale County researching for the project that would become Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Christenberry discovered the book fortuitously in 1960 while he was a painter in the art department at the University of Alabama and it greatly influenced his work. He left New York in the summer of 1962 to accept a teaching position at the University of Memphis (Hirsch, 2005). Since 1968, he has taught at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C.

His artistic career began with the painting of large abstract-expressionist canvasses, but gradually he began to be drawn to material that spoke about the place of his childhood. Though he was raised in Tuscaloosa, Christenberry spent his summers with extended family in rural Hale County. “It has been said that I was born in Hale County, but I was actually born in the city of Tuscaloosa, which is just a few miles north. My grandparents on both sides, the Smith Family and the Christenberry Family, were
farming families in Hale County… I was born and raised in Tuscaloosa, went to high
school there, and to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. My summer forays past
and present into Hale County are constant” (Christenberry in Hirsch, 2005, para. 3).

Other Work. Originally, Christenberry only used photography as a means to
record scenes he wanted to recreate in his paintings. He used a simple Kodak Brownie
camera which had been a Christmas gift, and developed the prints at a drugstore
(Dykstra, 2007). He took his first Brownie snapshots in 1958 while at the University of
Alabama. “It was a little 127 Brownie Holiday that Santa Claus had brought one year. It
was in the chest of drawers in my parents’ house. As a painting student, I wanted to
reference the landscape and things in the landscape, mostly the vernacular architecture, in
my painting…Back in the studio, it was the color reference, the memory jog that was
important to my paintings” (Christenberry in Hirsch, 2005, para. 16).

Walker Evans turned out to be a great influence on Christenberry’s work, both
through his own photographs and through their long personal relationship. In fact, it was
by Evans’ suggestion that Christenberry decided to pursue photography seriously
(Dykstra, 2007). The two met while Christenberry was living in New York. “I had eight
different jobs in twelve months. I had a Master’s degree, but I did not want to teach. I
sold men’s clothes in Greenwich Village. I was a custodian in Norman Vincent Peale’s
church on Fifth Avenue…Next I worked for a gallery on Madison Avenue, and finally I
ended up as a file clerk on the twenty-eighth floor in the picture collection at Time-
Life…And that was where Walker Evans worked as a senior editor for Fortune, on the
eighteenth floor…Months went by before I got up the nerve to see him” ”
(Christenberry in Hirsch, 2005, para. 13).
Evans asked to see Christenberry’s Brownie snapshots. “Young man,” Christenberry recalls him saying, “this little camera has become the perfect extension of your eye, I suggest that you take these seriously.” (in Dykstra, 2007, para. 5).

Christenberry admits, “At the time I was about as interested in photography as I was in physics – zero. But that’s how it began” (in Hirsch, 2005, para. 32). After that, Christenberry regularly used his camera to explore the subject he had already been using in his paintings, his home of Hale County, Alabama.

“Throughout his photographic career, Christenberry has used increasingly more sophisticated cameras. The formal qualities of scale and flattened two dimensional space are what distinguishes the photograph as being from a particular camera” (Hood in Christenberry, 2007, p.3). It was Lee Friedlander who suggested Christenberry try using a large format 8x10 camera for his landscapes in 1977. “One day, out of the blue, Lee Friedlander said to me that it would be interesting to see what I could do with a camera that produced a large negative, preferably 8x10. I said I never used anything like that. ‘You can learn, can’t you?,’ he said. Shortly after that, I began working with a Deardorff view camera lent to me by a friend” (Christenberry in Hirsch, 2005, para. 36). More recently, he has begun to use a contemporary 35 mm camera.

Christenberry returned south in 1962 to teach at Memphis State University. In 1968, he accepted a faculty position at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C. Christenberry remains on Corcoran’s faculty today. However, he has continued to make annual pilgrimages to Hale County, “fulfilling a personal ritual and documenting the physical changes wrought by the passing of a year” (“William Christenberry,” 2008, para. 1).

Christenberry is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Lyndhurst Foundation Prize in 1982; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1984; a Washington D.C. Mayor's Arts Award in 1986; the Alabama Prize in 1989; an Art Matters, Inc., grant in 1994; and an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa awarded in 1998.

Christenberry’s work belongs to numerous collections, including the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts.; the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson; the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.; the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York; the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia; the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas; the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American
Art in New York; the Milwaukee Museum of Art; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; and the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven.

Although Christenberry is a multi-media artist, he “is best known as a photographer of the vernacular South – country churches, graves, signs, shacks and tumbledown buildings whose slow decline he records in series of photographs taken over a period of years, sometimes decades” (Dykstra, 2007, para. 1). Christenberry’s photographs, however, differ from those of other Southern photographers like Sally Mann. “Christenberry distinguishes his photography from the work of other Southern shutterbugs through its restrained palette and no-nonsense compositions” (“Art and Soul,” 2008, para. 11). Although his work comes from a place of deep love and sentimentality for the landscape of his childhood, Christenberry does not want his work viewed as melancholy or wistful. “I don’t want my work thought about in terms of nostalgia. It is about place and sense of place…I am not looking back longing for the past, but at the beauty of time and the passage of time” (in Hirsch, 2005, para. 38). Therefore, Christenberry does not use any alternative photographic processes, filters or special treatments during developing to alter his images. Because the theme of his work is the chronicling of the passage of time, Christenberry wants the viewer to see what he sees, and what is actually on scene. “I don’t want the color hyped up and saturated. I want the photography to look just like what I’m seeing” (“Art and Soul,” 2008, para. 12).

Christenberry admits that his work springs out of a deep love and attachment to the county where he was born and raised. It informs all of his work. He is interested in showing not just a Southern way of life, or an Alabama way of life, or a Hale County way
of life, but life as he experienced it. “The family’s involvement with or attachment to that county and that place can’t help but affect the way I see it. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears were put into that landscape by these families – hard-working, deeply committed people” (Christenberry in Lange, 2008, p. 13) His work is, therefore, not just representative of a region, culture or socioeconomic group, but of Christenberry’s own experiences with that place. His mother once asked him why he doesn’t shoot any of the sprawling, ornate antebellum mansions that populate the area. Christenberry feels that the buildings are “too accessible, too ready-made for making a picture of them” (in Lange, 2008, p. 15). But perhaps it is also that these mansions are not the type of structures Christenberry and his family lived in or were surrounded by on a daily basis. Christenberry’s upbringing was a modest one; his father drove a bread truck for several years, and his uncle ran a general store. Those mansions and the people who lived in them were not Christenberry’s people. He was more interested in seeing and studying what was around him, the landscape of his youth, and the structures in that landscape touched by men like him. Due to this subject matter, Christenberry’s photographs seem similar to the FSA photographs of the 1930s. Both chronicle a rural, slow-to-develop, behind-the-times South which is struggling to keep up with the rest of the nation. But whereas the FSA photographs were meant not merely to document, but to exploit or condemn that rural Southern culture, Christenberry’s images document the vestiges of the region in order to preserve and celebrate them. It is important to recognize that Christenberry was so influenced by Agee and Evans’ book, both of whom worked for the FSA. Both the FSA and Christenberry’s work is biased, but their stances are quite different. “My stance is very subjective. The place is so much a part of me. I can’t
escape it and have no desire to escape it. I continue to come to grips with it. I don’t want my work to be thought of as maudlin or overly sentimental. It’s not. It’s a love affair – a lifetime of involvement with a place. The place is my muse” (in Hirsch, 2005, para. 52).

Christenberry’s first image was taken in 1961. It was made with his childhood Kodak Brownie camera Christenberry used to record scenes he wanted to recreate in paint. Christenberry says his Brownie photographs are “as honest a statement as I’ve ever made in my work, because I wasn’t thinking about making art. I was photographing things that caught my eye” (2007, p.3) House, Stewart, Alabama (Fig. 1), taken in 1962, before Christenberry saw himself as an art photographer, foretells of the kind of work he would create later in his career, and the type of structure and landscape that continues to engage his creative eye. As Christenberry’s career developed, he began to branch out in different creative mediums. “Christenberry’s theme, however, is singular: the history, the very story of place, is at the heart of his project” (“William Christenberry,” 2008, para. 1). Lucy Lippard defines place as “…space combined with memory” (1997, p. 9). And “Memory, in all its slippery inconstancy, is integral to Christenberry’s work” (Dykstra, 2007, para. 2).

Since 1961, he has returned to the South and Hale County yearly to re-photograph the landscape and structures which dot that landscape. His work shows the inevitable marks time has affected on the land, and what it has done to the culture of the South. Holly Koons McCullough, curator of fine arts and exhibits at the Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah, who recently held a Christenberry retrospective, says, “In the age of the ‘New South,’ Christenberry’s work memorializes the disappearing aspects of the region,
reminding us of the relentless march of time and the bittersweet certainty of change”
(“William Christenberry, 2008, para. 10)

*The Photographs.* One structure, which Christenberry calls “Building with False Brick Siding,” he has photographed in Warsaw, Alabama, from 1974 to 1994 (Fig. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). The series of images shows the structure being taken over by vines, starting first as a single growth up one pillar on the right of the porch, to engulfing the entire structure a decade later. The building is only revealed during winter when the vine briefly dies off. But when the seasons change and the rain comes, the vine flourishes again, and the building is reclaimed by the Southern landscape. This series of images not only shows the passage of time on this abandoned building, but also portrays the landscape as a living, breathing organism, that, although man may attempt to alter it, clear it, build upon it, is capable of reasserting itself and reclaiming that which man has taken. The vines swallow the building, and it is almost imperceptible that a man-made structure is even there. The building is hidden in the landscape; history is hidden in the landscape.

In a lecture given at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 26, 2007, Christenberry discusses a photograph of a roadside landscape engulfed by kudzu vine. *Kudzu with Storm Cloud, near Akron, Alabama, 1981* (Fig. 7) shows a similar scene. He remarks to the predominantly Southern crowd, “I don’t have to tell you what this is.” Southerners are all too familiar with the plant and the effects it has had on the Southern landscape. Kudzu was first introduced to the United States in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. In the 1930s, a congressional division named the Soil Erosion Service, recommended its use in the South to help stop the soil erosion caused by overuse of the land from poor agricultural methods and over-planting of crops. “About 85 million
kudzu seedlings were given to southern landowners by the Soil Erosion Service for land revitalization and to reduce soil erosion. The Civilian Conservation Corps also planted kudzu throughout the South. About 3 million acres of kudzu had been planted on farms by 1946” (Everest, 1999, para. 4).

What could not have been predicted, however, was the South’s perfect combination of soil, humidity and weather which allowed the invasive vine to grow at astounding rates. By the 1950s, kudzu “had spread rapidly throughout the South because of the long growing season, warm climate, plentiful rainfall, and lack of disease and insect enemies…Today, an estimated 7 million acres of land in the Southeast are infested with kudzu” (Everest, 1999, para. 9).

Christenberry first began photographing kudzu in 1978 (Fig. 8) (Lange, 2008). Kudzu Devouring Building, near Greensboro, Alabama, (Fig. 9) taken in 2004, shows further evidence of the deleterious effect this parasitic plant has had on the Southern landscape. Although it is a non-native species, kudzu has become emblematic of the Southern landscape. These images demonstrate “…the failure of the manmade to withstand the steady encroachment of nature” (Dykstra, 2007, para. 7). The kudzu covers the evidence of man, yet takes on the contours of the structure man made, leaving a lingering reminder of what once was.

Although not a part of the landscape like the kudzu-covered buildings, Christenberry’s subject Green Warehouse, Newburn, Alabama (Fig. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14) depicts a building that, because of its faded, limey color, seems to simply rise out of the grass, almost like a hill in the Southern grasscape. From 1973 to 2004, the building has remained largely unchanged. “The remarkable thing about the Green Warehouse is, in
fact, its constancy over 30 years, since that trait is not shared with most of the things Christenberry photographs” (Dykstra, 2007, para. 8). It effectively conveys, however, that Christenberry’s work is not entirely about loss and longing. In this case, time has not effected much change to the Green Warehouse. This fact supports the case that the South has not entirely changed over the decades, either. It is not all disappearing – some structures and institutions, both positive and negative, remain. Although a lot changes in the South, a good deal stays the same. It is not, in fact, being entirely homogenized into mainstream American culture. With this one series of simple, straightforward shots of a dilapidated green building, Christenberry makes a strong statement about the status of the South. “In fact, Christenberry’s photographic series of individual buildings, gridded images tracing changes over time, are about an ever-the-same present, emphatically still here and now, even if the art world, and the rest of our world, too, for that matter, has consigned it to the past” (Christenberry, 2006, p. 15). University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor and author George Tindall said, “The Vanishing South, it turns out, has staged one of the most prolonged disappearing acts since the decline and fall of the Roman Empire” (in Smith, 1985, p. 96). The Green Warehouse series exemplifies this in living color.

Perhaps one of Christenberry’s most well-known subjects is the Palmist Building in Havana Junction, Alabama. It is one of Christenberry’s most well-documented subjects, and the one that is most personal to him. He first photographed the building in 1961, but he “had known the Palmist Building all of my life. Originally, it was a country store run by my great uncle Sydney Duncan, my grandmother’s brother. It was on my father’s break truck route in the 1940s” (Christenberry in Hirsch, 2005, para. 44). It also
stood in the fork of the road which led to Christenberry’s maternal and paternal grandparents homes, so he continued to pass it frequently all his life. Gypsies took over the space when Christenberry’s uncle retired and turned it into a palm-reading and fortune-telling business for a very short time. Christenberry’s 1961 photograph was a rare black-and-white image shot with his Kodak Brownie. “The first color picture, and probably the definitive view, was made in 1971” (Fig. 15) (Christenberry in Hirsch, 2005, para. 46). Christenberry continued to return to this site, faithfully documenting the changes in the structure after it was abandoned (Fig. 16). The weathered boards and growth of trees show the passage of time, while the stage of the foliage marks the passing seasons. The position of the palmist sign in the window also invites commentary on the place of a practice like palm-reading in the evangelical Christian-dominated South. Just as palm reading turns religion on its head, the inverted sign comments on the place of a palmist in Southern society.

The last photograph of the building, in 1988, shows “…a lonely cluster of trees marking the spot where the structure used to be” (Fig. 17) (Dykstra, 2007, para. 8). Eleanor Harvey, chief curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, says about images such as the 1988 photograph, “There’s a sense of loss, of coming to a place you’ve been visiting for years and realizing that something you took as permanent isn’t” (in Butler, 2007, para. 5). “The Palmist Building studies not only reflect Christenberry’s love of signs and vernacular architecture, but, like all of his work, are acts of preservation…” (Dykstra, 2007, para. 8).

In 2008, Susanne Lange published a compilation of Christenberry’s photographs, as well as some of his sign-work and sculpture, in a book called Working from Memory.
Along with the visual record of his work, Lange included personal stories from Christenberry about each of the subjects included in the book. Christenberry has said that the oral traditions of the South have greatly influenced his work. He was quoted as saying it was Agee’s words in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that resonated with him more than Evans’ photographs. “It was Agee’s words – Agee being a fellow Southerner, from Tennessee – that literally overwhelmed me” (Christenberry in Winters, 2007, para. 9). In *Working from Memory*, Christenberry not only tells the stories of how his photographs were made, but also relates anecdotes from his childhood and life growing up in and visiting Hale County. Taking a second look at Christenberry’s work with the benefit of this personal reflection alongside adds an entirely new layer to his images. Christenberry speaks in a non-studied, easy conversational style about his life and work. He allows the reader to see a very poignant side of his relationship to Alabama, to his family and to his life’s work. By doing so, he gives his reader and viewer the opportunity to better understand not only where he comes from as an artist, but where he comes from.

For example, the photograph *White Door, near Stewart, Alabama, 1977* (Fig. 18) at first glance appears to be another of Christenberry’s attempts to capture a particular type of Southern vernacular architecture. However, in *Working from Memory*, Christenberry tells us that this structure is actually the former residence of his Grandparents Christenberry. That white door was in reality much more personal, as it was “the exterior door of my grandmother’s kitchen” (Christenberry in Lange, 2008, p.20). This information gives the image an entirely different sense of depth and profundity, as it suggests all the activity that surrounded it as he was growing up - the family who entered and exited, the meals enjoyed there, the physical and spiritual
nourishment he must have received just inside that door. But as it tells the Christenberry family story, the image also tells the story of countless other rural, Southern families living and working in the region as his did.

Christenberry revisits the Green Warehouse series in Lange’s book. He tells how he came to know the owner of the property, Mr. Walthall, who also owned the property on which another of his subjects, Black Building, stands. Mr. Walthall was supportive of Christenberry’s work and allowed him to photograph freely and repeatedly on his properties. One year, while Christenberry was re-photographing the Green Warehouse, Mr. Walthall told him of his plans to paint the building. However, he said to Christenberry, “Oh, don’t you worry son. I’m going to paint it the same John Deere green just for you” (in Lange, 2008, p. 38). Furthermore, upon his death, Walthall gave instructions that the building was to remain untouched for Christenberry. Christenberry writes of the gesture, “Isn’t that nice?” (in Lange, 2008, p. 38). With his casual storytelling, Christenberry gives the viewer and reader the rare opportunity to understand the culture of the South not only visually, but personally. The sense of family and community, and Southern grace that has been mythologized in pop culture, is present in this anecdote in living, bona fide form. A series of images which were once valuable as a record of the effect of time on a region, is now also a testament to the personal culture of the region.

Christenberry’s images and words are poignant, personal and deeply illuminating. His simple, straight-forward photographs tell the story of a place, its inhabitants and its culture. “In the process of documenting the evolution of a building and its surrounding over time, he provides a chronicle of that structure’s evolving identity” and thereby, a
To be able to glimpse inside his mind’s eye, and explore and understand Christenberry’s relationship to his homeland, gives all viewers, Southern or not, an opportunity to better understand Southern culture. Christenberry is not only telling the story of Hale County with his images, but also telling his own story, both as an artist and as a Southerner. “I feel very, very fortunate that I have something to say and to record through my work,” Christenberry says, “I hope I have created a record of what I care about…It may not be spelled out in words, but I do hope there’s a certain visual poetry to what I do. And it means the world to me” (2008, p. 102).

*Sally Mann*

“The repertoire of the Southern artist has long included place, the past, family, death, and dosages of romance that would be fatal to most contemporary artists. But the stage on which these are played out is always the Southern landscape, terrible in its beauty, in its indifference” (Mann, 2005, p. 52).

Speaking about herself and other Southern artists, photographer Sally Mann said, “I think there’s certain things you can say about Southern artists, and that is their love of the land, their commitment to the past, their susceptibility to myth, but the main thing, I think, about us Southerners is we’re willing to experiment with dosages of romance that would be fatal to any other post-modern artist” (in Cantor, 2006). This can certainly be said on Mann’s body of work. She has spent her career photographing people, landscapes and objects which are both familiar and sentimental to her. “It never occurred to me to leave home to make art,” Mann said (in Cantor, 2006). Mann’s first one-person show was in 1977, Sally Mann: the Lewis Law Portfolio, but it was the often nude photographs of her three children published in the early 1990s which thrust her onto the
national art scene. More recently, however, she has focused her lens on the landscapes of her homeland, Virginia, and landscapes of the South at large.

**Biography.** Mann was born in Lexington, Virginia in 1951. She was raised on her family’s large farm in Lexington, where she continues to live and work. Mann has rarely left the state. Mann stayed in Virginia for college, and received a Bachelor of Arts from Hollins College in 1951, and a master of arts in writing from the same school in 1975. According to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., which holds some of Mann’s work in its collection, Mann’s achievements include: numerous awards, including three National Endowment for the Arts fellowships and a Guggenheim fellowship. *Time* magazine named Mann as America’s best photographer in 2001. Her photographs have been exhibited internationally and are in the permanent collections of major museums worldwide, including the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Mann’s photographs have been featured in several Corcoran exhibitions including “In Response to Place: Photographs from The Nature Conservancy’s Last Great Places” in 2001, “Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry” in 1996 and “Sally Mann: The Lewis Law Portfolio” in 1977. Her publications include *Second Sight, At Twelve, Immediate Family, Still Time, Deep South*, and *What Remains*. Mann frequently contributes essays and commentary to her publications, demonstrating her talent for crafting the written word, as well as a haunting visual image.

A documentary film about Mann’s work, *Blood Ties*, directed by University of Southern California Film School Graduate Steven Cantor, was nominated for an
Academy Award in 1993. Cantor followed that documentary with a feature-length film about Mann’s career titled, *What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann*

Mann still lives on the same family farm where she spent her childhood. In the documentary, *What Remains: the Life and Work of Sally Mann*, she comments that most of the trees on the property were planted by her father, a sculptor, whom she describes as a modest, but brilliant and complicated man. Her husband, Larry, a lawyer professionally, is also a sculptor. However, Mann became the bread-winning artist of the family with her photography while Larry pursued the law. Mann started as a commercial photographer. In her words, her early work was “hand-shake and hand over the check kind-of pictures…the swim team, all that stuff” (in Cantor, 2006).

Her husband, Larry, has said that Mann has always had a camera in her hand since the day they met. After more than two decades of marriage, Larry Mann can tell when she is thinking of a new photograph by the way her face changes. “She sees the world in images,” Larry Mann said (in Cantor, 2006). Her son Emmet Mann has also said of her creative process, “She sees something that she doesn’t want to forget” (in Cantor, 2006). Mann explains why she feels the need to photograph and record what she does, “The land itself isn’t going to remember, but the artist will” (in Cantor, 2006). Mann is deeply rooted to the local land she photographs; it is her foundation and motivation, it is both what grounds and excites her. “One of my favorite poets (William Carlos Williams)…makes it all about what he calls ‘the local,’ and he actually makes it a noun, and he’s right…For me, the local has 2 parts, my family and the land. They give me comfort in times of failure and, of course, they’re the wellspring or inspiration for all of my work” (in Cantor, 2006).
Other Work. There is nothing more local and intimate than a person’s family, and that is where Mann’s artistic work began. In 1992, her book, Immediate Family, was published. It was a compilation of the work she had done over a several year period photographing her children. The work proved to be both popular and controversial. After working with that project for over ten years, Mann began to focus on the landscapes those children inhabited - the landscape of not only her children but Mann and her mother as well. Mann’s first exhibition of the resulting images was aptly titled Mother Land: Recent Landscapes of Georgia and Virginia. The move to landscape photography was an organic evolution. Mann has said that the landscape was always present and integral to her photographs, just to a lesser degree. “Somehow, it was such a smooth segue between the children and the landscapes; the children kept getting smaller and smaller in the pictures and I’d be looking at the landscapes and place this little distant child off in it, and then pretty soon the landscapes really took over” (in Cantor, 2006). This encroachment of the landscape is evident in Mann’s photograph, Emmett, Jessie, Virginia, 1992 (Fig. 19). Although the children are still the central focus of the image due to their location in the frame, they are reduced to hazy, minuscule figures rendered unrecognizable. Upon closer examination, the viewer sees it is the tree branches, twigs and scrub flowers which figure more predominantly in the photograph. In a 1994 letter to Aperture magazine’s senior editor Melissa Harris, Mann writes, “I sense that there’s something strange happening in the family pictures. The kids seem to be disappearing from the image, receding into the landscape. I used to conceive of the picture first and then look for a good place to take it, but now I seem to find the backgrounds and place the child in them, hoping for something interesting to happen” (1995, p. 24).
However, in *Immediate Family*, Mann discusses those landscapes in which her children pose, “I have lived all my life in southwestern Virginia, the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. And all my life many things have been the same…Some time ago I found a glass-plate negative picturing the cliffs in the 1800s. I printed it and held it up against the present reality, and the trees and caves and stains on the rock are identical. Even the deadwood, held in place by tenacious vines, has not slipped down…it seems that time effects slow changes here.” (in Mavor, 2002, para. 3). From that statement, it is clear that Mann already saw the landscape as fundamental to her work and to herself as a Southerner. It follows that she would eventually make it the central focus of her work. Mann says she was “ambushed by my backgrounds” and admitted that the resulting images were “wildly romantic and sentimental” (in Cantor, 2006). As a result, she was expecting them to be poorly received by the art world. However, the opposite was true, and the collection was lauded by critics and viewers alike, both Southern and not.

In creating her Southern landscape photographs, Mann employed an antiquated method of using glass plate negatives and a wet-collodion process. “ Introduced in 1851, the wet-collodion process is a method of making photographic negatives using a glass plate coated with chemicals. The plate is sensitized in a silver nitrate solution and exposed to light while still wet and sticky, which gives the photographer about 5 minutes to make the exposure” (“Sally Mann,” 2004, para. 6). Mann first began experimenting with this process in 1999 (Siple, 2008). Mann frequently took her darkroom with her on shooting expeditions, mixing chemicals and developing glass plates under a tent in the back of her sport utility vehicle. The combination of unstable chemicals and an unpredictable environment in the field led to many “happy accidents” in the development
of several images. Mann likes it that way. Many of her favorite photographs contain flaws, discoloration and defects, which are present due to the fickle nature of the wet-collodion process. Mann marvels at the perfection in the prints created by Western expedition photographers, like Carlton Watkins and William Henry Jackson, who carried their glass plates out into the wilderness on donkeys. Mann hopes she never becomes as proficient at the process. The hazy, dream-like quality the process gives her images adroitly communicates the romanticism and sentimentality with which she strives to imbue them. When making these photographs, Mann said, “I look for it always, the thick, vespertine gloaming that douses the day’s heat. When it comes, the landscape becomes soft and vague, as if inadequately summoned by some shiftless deity, casually neglectful of the details. Making a photograph in these conditions is a challenge…and the resulting image often appears to have been breathed onto the negative, a moist refugence within deepening shadows” (2005, p. 7). Mann unashamedly admits to making images that are not only documentary, but provide commentary on a native observation of the Southern landscape. She sees her homeland as a muse, something which is magical, full of memory, nourishment and inspiration. Mann said, “There is magic in the landscape, the question is whether I could get at it” (in Cantor, 2006). As Mann herself states, this treatment is something common to Southern artists, and they get away with it.

The wet-collodion process Mann uses for her landscape images was also used during the time of the Civil War by American photographers like Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner. The large format camera she employs is also the same equipment used during that era. “The resulting images, which are flecked with marks and blemishes
from the sticky collodion negative, are unnervingly similar to their historic counterparts. Where faces and bodies once punctuated dim fields, the trees overhead are still rendered in a blur…” (Siple, 2008, para. 2). This is noteworthy because Mann visits and shoots some of the same battlefields and landscapes Brady and his staff documented. The opportunity to see the same or similar landscapes, well over a century later, by a contemporary artist like Mann but through the lens of the same antique equipment provides the modern viewer with such a thought-provoking look at not only the history of photography, but the history of the South and of America. “Wet collodion photography…was the most popular photographic process between about 1850 and 1880 – or, during the South’s last gasp, the Civil War and Reconstruction” (Green, 2004, para. 8). Mann’s decision to use this process is exciting and affords her viewers an opportunity to look more acutely into Southern history.

However, Mann’s foray into this type of photography was by happenstance. She stumbled onto a collection of antique glass-plate negatives in the attic of the University of Lexington in 1972 (“Mother Land”). “Taken by a returning Civil War veteran, Mann discovered that many of the images were familiar views of the rivers and cliffs that surround her home. Whereas the post-Civil War images are over a century old and evoke places in the present, Mann’s ‘Mother Land’ images, taken in 1996, seem to recall places from a forgotten past” (“Mother Land,” 2001, para. 2). For a Southern artist, however, these places and their history are not forgotten. Southerners embrace and perpetuate their history and all its traditions and mythologies. In the opening to her book, Deep South, Mann writes, “Because of this history of defeat and loss, we Southerners embrace the Proustian concept that the only true paradise is a lost paradise. Like Proust, we know
love emerges from loss and becomes memory, and that memory informs and enriches art” (2005, p.7). Southerners hold onto the past and these mythologies fervently, not wanting to yield to advancement and homogenization. “Katherine Dieckmann writes in her review of *Mother Land*, ‘It’s often said that the South is hyperbolized by those seeking a site of nostalgia and excess, a place where the sweet, humid air forever carried an aroma of loss…But…it’s often Southerners who promote their own clichés, and every cliché contains a smidge of truth’” (in Mavor, 2002, para. 10).

W.J. Cash, author of *The Mind of the South*, said the landscape of the South was “a sort of cosmic conspiracy against reality in favor of romance” where “directed thinking is all but impossible, a mood in which the mind yields almost perforce to drift and in which the imagination holds unchecked sway” (in Smith, 1985, p. 6). The viewer can certainly believe this when gazing upon the hazy images in Mann’s book, *Deep South*. Published in 2005, *Deep South* is a compilation of photographs Mann took throughout the 1990s. She began on her own family’s land in Lexington, Virginia, and then went further south to Georgia, finally ending up in the “Deep South” of Louisiana and Mississippi, for which the book is named. The book is divided into sections based on this migration. It begins with plates shot in Georgia, followed by a second section in Virginia. The photographs themselves are not identified by a title or any other way, leaving the viewer to imagine the subject and project their own histories onto the images. The middle portion of the book is titled “Deep South,” the final section is “Last Measure,” and contains images of former Civil War battlefields. Ending with these photographs is most appropriate since these scenes were “the final vision for closing eyes” of so many men (Mann, 2005, p. 89). Mann also contributes a short introduction
to each of these sections, in which she discusses her feelings about being a Southerner, and what history’s legacy has been to Southern people. She is, therefore, acutely aware of the history and memory that her images conjure. Mann writes, “Living in the South often means slipping out of temporal joint, a peculiar phenomenon that I find both nourishes and wounds. To identify a person as a Southerner suggests not only that her history is inescapable and formative but that it is also impossibly present” (2005, p. 7).

The Photographs. One of the early photographs in Deep South is of a tree covered in vines, the edges of the image hazy and black, light filtering through the center and right edge, pulling the viewer into the photograph, into the forest, into reverie (Fig. 20). Although this image could be of any tree in any forest, the vine swallowing this tree is kudzu and therefore signals that this is a Southern scene. In fact, it is not even evident that the large mass in the foreground of the image is a tree – the trunk and leaf canopy are not visible. However, a Southern viewer would instantly recognize what was hidden beneath those vines. Kudzu has been called “the vine that ate the South,” and is a familiar feature of the Southern landscape.

“Kudzu has pervaded Southern life to such an extent that for many it has become a distinct emblem of the South. References to kudzu abound in folklore, music, literature, advertising, and Southern popular culture, testifying to kudzu’s invasion of the individual psyche and the collective ethos of the South” (Blaustein, 2001, p. 55) Therefore, although this image may appear on first inspection to be a simple scene of a lush forest landscape, the image actually speaks of the history of an agriculturally-struggling South, where government intervention was needed to keep farms and families
afloat, but did not always succeed. Whether or not Mann’s intention was to convey this type of message, only a Southern artist could convey those nuances from such a scene.

On page seventy-two of *Deep South* (Fig. 21), ruined columns of an ancient plantation reach skyward. Decorative ironwork which may have once adorned a grand balcony is suspended precariously in the sky. Mann shot this photograph at a sharp upward angle, making the columns appear, at first glance, to be trees. In fact, from Mann’s perspective, the structures tower above the tree canopies in the distance. As the viewer’s eye is pulled from the darkened lower edge of the image, up to the lightened top edge, he realizes that this is not a natural structure, but man-made. “These abandoned monoliths seem as ancient as the trees that surround them, less the product of human hands than of the land itself” (“Deep South,” 2001, para. 1). Page seventy-four also shows such an image (Fig. 22). These beautiful, but decaying, remnants of once-grand plantations tell the story of loss and abandonment which occurred after the Civil War. The South of moonlight and magnolias, chivalrous plantation owners and their beautiful Southern belles was over. Like ancient Roman ruins stand as testaments to the prosperity of a once-great empire, so, too, do these dilapidated architectural structures recall glory days gone by. However, unlike the Roman ruins, these are not being preserved for any historical significance. They have simply been abandoned, forsaken remnants of the past. They also expose the fact that progress has not come easily or successfully to the South. The fact that these physical structures are still intact suggests that the ideologies which were housed by them may still be intact, as well.

The plate on page eighty-three of *Deep South* (Fig. 23) speaks more loudly and obviously of the turbulent history of the South. “An image of a tree in Woodville,
Mississippi becomes a striking symbol of the condition of the South. Cutting deep into its trunk, a massive scar becomes the focal point of an otherwise idyllic image; and yet the tree continues to thrive, just as the South itself” (“Deep South,” 2001, para. 1). What happened under that tree? A lynching, a picnic, a farm’s harvest, a slave plantation, kids swinging from its branches? How did that scar, seemingly by an axe, come to be there? Although the actual reason may be benign, the image it invokes is menacing. The aged treatment of the photograph harkens the viewer back in history, which for the South was rife with hardship and violence, causing the mind to immediately jump to images of pain or turbulence. The image confronts the viewer plainly with that past and thrusts its pain upon you. The viewer is left with the overwhelming feeling that something sinister happened here. And in the history of the South, that something was likely to have ended in death.

“By the late nineteenth century, mob violence had become a prominent feature of race relations in the South that for many symbolized black oppression. Lynching also came to define southern distinctiveness every bit as much as the Mason-Dixon line marked the boundary of the region” (Brundage, 1997, p. 4). Although the practice of lynching took place across all regions of the United States early in the country’s settlement, it continued to occur with more frequency and ferocity in the South and became primarily an implement of racism. “The proportion of lynchings that occurred in the South rose with each succeeding decade after the Civil War, increasing from 82 percent of all lynchings in the nation during the 1880s to more than 95 percent during the 1920s” (Brundage, 1997, p. 4). There were an estimated three-thousand two-hundred and twenty blacks lynched in the region from 1880 to 1930 (Brundage, 1997).
Furthermore, lynching continued to be carried out in the South long after it had been largely abandoned in the rest of the country. “Casualties of extralegal violence in some lynch-prone states in the South equaled or exceeded the totals of entire regions outside the South” (Brundage, 1997, p.4). Given these statistics, the South has come to be equated more widely with lynching than the other regions of the United States. Many of these executions were carried out via hanging. Mann’s image of the butchered tree, therefore, can readily invoke a mental image of this type of execution.

The length and width of the tree’s scar hints that perhaps someone attempted to cut it down. Was the trunk too strong and tough to be broken? In this way, the tree is emblematic of the South itself. It is matured, with a strong trunk and deep roots, thriving in a rural landscape, but it possesses a deep, disfiguring mark which cannot be erased, which it eternally will bear.

On page seventy-seven of the book is an image of the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi, the site of young African-American Emmett Till’s murder in 1955 (Fig. 24). This image is the only one which Mann singles out to discuss. “The murder of Emmett Till has haunted me since I first became aware of it, early in my life” (Mann, 2005, p. 50). The resulting photograph Mann made of the scene is yellowed, distorted and almost impossible to decipher. Perhaps this is a testament to the fact that the murder of this young man was also impossible to understand. Mann says of the scene, “Pushing through the undergrowth at the river’s edge, we stared in amazement at the humdrum, back-washy feeling of the place. How could a place so fraught with historical pain appear to be so ordinary?” (2005, p. 52).
The murder of Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago, Illinois, was a motivating event for the Civil Rights Movement in the South. Till was murdered in rural Money, Mississippi while in town visiting family. Till was alleged to have made an inappropriate comment to a local white woman, something that was punishable by judgment of the lynch mob at this time in much of the South. “Within Southern communities, interracial intimacy was unevenly distributed. The least intimacy existed between white women and black men…” therefore, black men were “careful not to look or act offensively in the presence of a white woman, and in general attempt to minimize contacts with them in order to avoid the too-ready suspicion of white men” (Brundage, 1997, p. 53). Young Emmett was caught in the middle of this delicate dance. As an outsider in the small community of Money, Mississippi, the retribution for such an act was all the more brutal. “If a black man accused of misbehavior toward a white woman was a complete stranger, the likelihood of lethal punishment was all the greater” (Brundage, 1997, p. 54). Till was kidnapped, beaten and killed by a mob headed by the woman’s husband, and his body discarded in the Tallahatchie River of Mann’s photograph. This incident was a pivotal one for many Americans, both in and out of the South, including Mann. In fact, Mann named her only son, Emmett. When the viewer possesses the benefit of this background, what was once a simple photograph of a river bank is transformed into a social and political document fraught with emotion.

The final section of Mann’s book also grapples with the South’s history of violence. “Last Measure,” comprised of images of Civil War battlegrounds, contains an image on page one-hundred-eight in which the rolling hills of the landscape look like burial mounds (Fig. 25). The image suggests that the Southern landscape is alive; there is
life beneath the ground, literally and figuratively. “Mann’s new series could be called Gothic Picturesque. They suggest the frightening quiet of the Civil War battlefield at night, or the unsettled ghosts that might roam the landscape today” (Green, 2004, para. 7). Perhaps the most defining event in Southern history was the Civil War. That event triggered the legacy of the South viewing themselves as a Gothic, defeated place – the memory of that loss has not left the region. Mann writes. “…in America only the South has known the tread of the occupier’s boot and the homeward shamble of defeated soldiers. Pain…is a dimension of old civilizations; the South has it, the rest of the United States does not” (2005, p. 7).

**John McWilliams**

“My work is inspired by experiences and life in the Lowcountry, where the issues of life and its transitions are so poignantly felt within the landscape” (in “John McWilliams,” Artist Biography, para. 1)

Unlike Mann and Christenberry, photographer John McWilliams was not born in the South. However, he came to the region as a young man and has spent the past thirty years living, working and photographing his adopted home. McWilliams describes his first visit to the South, “a very romantic undertaking. All I remember is that when I got back to Providence, I wanted to leave, real bad” (in Lesy, 1985, p. 97). True to his words, McWilliams immediately moved to Atlanta, and has remained in the South since. McWilliams’ length of time in the region, and his devotion to capturing its landscapes photographically, qualifies his work for discussion here. In his latest book, *Working from Memory*, Christenberry remarked, “I think that oftentimes art can make an outsider look back on something he has never been a part of, and make him feel like he has always been a part of it”(2008, p. 13). Indeed, there is a definitive undercurrent of the local and
familiar in McWilliams’ photographs. His images make interesting juxtapositions with Christenberry’s photographs. Whereas Christenberry spent his childhood in the South, but his adulthood in Washington, D.C., McWilliams spent his childhood outside of the South, but his entire adult life (more than forty years) in Georgia. Therefore, each photographer approaches and attempts to grapple with the landscape from a unique position. Through McWilliams’ images, we have an inside view of the relationship he develops with the Southern landscape the longer he lives in the region. Like both Christenberry and Mann, McWilliams’ photography began at home. “To me the whole involvement with photographing the South has been an organic recognition. It started in my own backyard, in my own tomato patch…” (Rankin, 1989, p. 12) His work begins where most would, exploring the past through images of old plantations, ancient trees and kudzu-covered landscapes, but ends with images of the rapid industrialization and resulting destruction and degradation of the landscape of the New South. We can see McWilliams discovering, and coming to terms with, the South he is becoming a part of. His eyes become more open as he looks for more photographic subject matter, and our eyes become more open to the realities of the new Southern landscape as well.

Biography. John McWilliams was born in 1941 in Massachusetts, and received his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in fine art from the Rhode Island School of Art and Design (RISD). Since leaving RISD, McWilliams taught photography at Cooper Union in New York before moving to the South, specifically Georgia in 1969. He joined the Georgia State University School of Art and Design faculty that year. Since then, McWilliams has had a successful academic career, expanding the size and reputation of the programs under his direction. McWilliams became the Graduate Director of his
department in 1995, and shortly thereafter was made Director of the School. While still working with the university, he maintains a home, a log cabin McWilliams built himself, in the countryside of McClellanville, Georgia.

*Other Work.* McWilliams’ work has been exhibited both regionally and nationally, and he has been awarded several honors and grants. The same year he became Director of the School of Art and Design, McWilliams was awarded the Georgia Council for the Arts Artist Grant. His biography provided by the Georgia State University lists his awards and exhibitions as follows: “Some Southern Stories” at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College in Chicago, Illinois in 1999; “First Light: The Nexus Photographers 1973-1978” at the Atlanta Photography Group in Atlanta, Georgia in 1998; “Sea Change: The Seascape in Contemporary Photography” at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1998; “Evicted Sentiments: Southern Documentary Photography” at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1998; “Picturing the South: 1860 to the Present” at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia in 1996; and “Eight Georgia Photographers,” exhibited in Finland from 1995-1996. McWilliams’ work is in a number of private and corporate collections including the Jacksonville Art Museum, the Delaware Art Museum, the University of Nebraska Sheldon Art Gallery, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Fogg Museum at Harvard University, the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Publications containing McWilliams photographs include: *Sea Change: The Seascape in Contemporary Photography, Sleep: Bedtime Reading, Picturing the South:*
Like Christenberry, McWilliams was informed by Agee’s and Evans’ book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. However, McWilliams’ photos are not celebratory like Mann’s and Christenberry’s. His photographs are always a stark and melancholy black and white. All show a defeated South or an exhausted landscape. There is nothing joyful in his images, although they are still achingly beautiful. McWilliams’ photographs do not function as “acts of preservation,” but as documents of a forgotten, abandoned South. His images seem more like a testament to all that has gone wrong in the South. As McWilliams absorbed the atmosphere of his home, he saw a landscape that was “barren, burnt-out, desolate, washed-out. Stretches of pines and non-descript land that looked like it had been there for centuries without change. I felt I had to go under the surface of it. Somewhere, underneath, there were shadows” (in Lesy, 1985, p. 106). Abandoned, once-glorious, now decaying plantation houses; scarred, depleted earth from over-farming, wastelands of landscapes stripped bare of any and all natural resources that could be profitable; and debris from factories and industry pollute his landscapes.

Theodore Rosengarten, who wrote the introduction to McWilliams’ 1989 book, *Land of Deepest Shade*, said in an *Aperture* magazine article, “No photographer has done more to discover and accept the truth of Southern defeats than John McWilliams” (1989, p. 2)

His Southern photographs in *Land of Deepest Shade*, both a 1989 museum exhibition at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and an accompanying book published by the Aperture Foundation and the High Museum, were taken between 1973 and 1987.
Like Christenberry, McWilliams also used a Deardorff camera, but a five by seven inch format, to make his landscape photographs (Lesy, 1985, pp. 113-114). The exhibition also traveled to museums throughout the South and was comprised of over one hundred of McWilliams’ images. “I think the first ones were when I started to go out into the country and I initially photographed architecture. Those pictures would lead me into pictures I really cared about, pictures about the atmosphere, the architecture versus the vegetation. The conflict that might exist there” (Rankin, 1989, p. 11)

The Photographs. One such photograph opens McWilliams’ book. **Blackville, South Carolina, 1974** (Fig. 26) is of the round neo-classical portico of a crumbling Southern mansion. The stature of the structure and its fluted columns suggest it may have once been a stately plantation house representative of Southern mythology. However, the house itself is competing, both in the image and in reality, with the advancing foliage and undergrowth in which it is situated. In fact, the front of the house appears to be emerging out of that landscape, not sitting upon it, but a part of it. The wild landscape is in control of the environment, and it is only a matter of time before the once-grand home is consumed and re-claimed by it.

Similarly, **Dearing, Georgia, 1974** (Fig. 27) and **Eatonton, Georgia, 1973** (Fig. 28) both show homes being slowly consumed by vegetation. In **Dearing, Georgia, 1974**, the process has just begun – one vine is creeping across the clapboard porch and up the side of the modest dwelling. It peeks into the homes’ window like an intruder, patiently biding its time until it possesses the entire structure. In the dark left corners of the image, a porch swing is visible, and the viewer is left to wonder if the home has been recently abandoned, or simply neglected. The home in **Eatonton, Georgia, 1973**, conversely, is a
much grander home, but also shows obvious evidence of long-term neglect. The floor to ceiling windows are barred with rotting shutters, and the front-porch columns, once majestic in scale, are choked by thick, dry vines. Unlike *Blackville, South Carolina, 1974*, it is those gnarled vines which are the focal point of the photograph; the house has become the backdrop for the wild landscape.

In *Sumter County, Georgia, 1973* (Fig. 29), the metamorphosis is complete. The building in this image, perhaps a barn, shed or small home, is completely engulfed by vines. It has now become a part of the landscape. It is impossible to tell what the structure once was; the vines conceal the scale of the building, only a roof-line can be discerned.

In *Crowfield Plantation, 1974* (Fig. 30), McWilliams photographs a single remaining wall of what we know from the title to have been a plantation house. The word “plantation” suggests all sorts of stereotypes including a grand, columned manor house (like in McWilliams’ other images) populated by cavaliers, Southern Belles and their slaves, sitting atop a sweeping vista of cotton or tobacco fields. Here, however, the myth of the plantation paradigm is uncovered, literally. The building has been worn down by time and the unforgiving Southern weather year after year until all that remains are a few bricks. Likewise, although many Southern image-makers would like to hold onto the memory of the Southern plantation, the allegory has “gone with the wind.”

“McWilliams’s landscapes depict scenes from various historical stages, from remnants of original sites to frightful incarnations of the New South” (Rosengarten, 1989, p. 7) One image of the failures of the New South is *Oconee River, 1973* (Fig. 31) depicting a deteriorating trestle bridge stretching over a murky body of water. And once
again, the vines we see overwhelm so many of McWilliams’ subjects here, too, have begun to crawl up and claim the structure. The machine may have intruded into the garden, but nature is swallowing it. Just as the steel bridge and cement pillars stand as a testament to American engineering, the Southern environment evidences its erosive and corrosive impact over time. No longer serving its intended purpose, the bridge stands as a testament to the attempt and frequent failure of the South to advance and industrialize. The photograph, then, becomes a document of that failure. “History may have occurred here, but it is not occurring now,” Rosengarten observes (in McWilliams, 1989, p. 5).

Bridges like the one in Oconee River were one of McWilliams’ preferred subjects. However, he describes an epiphany he had one day while shooting under a bridge in Kentucky. “I was standing underneath a highway bridge…I got a sense of the scarred land, the dirt, lit by this prophetic, holy light. It was timeless underneath there. I saw the land for the first time…Everyone looked at what was on top, but underneath was the enigma on which everything rested” (in Lesy, 1985, p. 108) From that moment on, McWilliams decided to travel the South, photographing its landscape along the way. As author Michael Lesy describes it, McWilliams had “the hope and the indictment that all were hidden in the shape of the southern land” (1985, p. 108).

In Washington County, Georgia, 1975 (Fig. 32), McWilliams shows us another muddy body of water, this time running through a ravaged landscape. “Being in the South at that time (1970’s) I found things were changing rapidly. You would go to these places and it was just startling sometimes. The land was being completely transformed and changed. You really didn’t have to look very hard to find the juxtapositions of new with the old, the scarred land of development and that sort of thing.” (Rankin, 1989, p. 13)
The natural landscape here has been decimated to make way for industry and profit; a barren, uninhabitable wasteland is all that remains. The image tells not only of the wasteful agricultural practices of the New South, but also reminds us of the unsuccessful attempts at farming during and following the Great Depression, when government intervention was needed to save the South’s agrarian poor. The South has not learned its lesson, this image says, the scale may be larger, but the result is the same.

McWilliams documents a similar scene again in *Copperhill, Tennessee, 1977* (Fig. 33). *Washington County* and *Copperhill* could be mistaken for differently angled views of the same landscape, with *Copperhill* shot from a more removed distance. However, we know from the photographs’ titles that they are two different locations in two different states in the South. McWilliams points out to the viewer that this type of environmental misuse occurred throughout the region, and on a large scale. The hole left in the landscape in *Copperhill* is canyon-like, and the vantage point McWilliams gives his viewer pulls him down into that abyss. The landscape which stretches out for miles in every direction from the chasm is patchy and barren, only broken by roads which seem to lead to nowhere. Where are all the people who created this mess? It certainly took a great number of men and machinery to create such a canyon. But, they are gone now. All that is left is wasted land. McWilliams’ image suggests the uselessness of this practice.

Neither Christenberry nor Mann come close to touching this type of subject matter. Perhaps it is because they have seen this type of waste all their lives that they are not as moved by it. McWilliams, on the other hand, seems to be calling out to Southerners and demanding they pay attention to what they are destroying. These series of photos have a decidedly environmental bent. These are images of sterile and denuded
landscapes possibly caused by over-cutting or strip-mining. For Southerners, “The land is a great provider, they all say; it is the essential provider, and we kid ourselves to think we can put it behind us or continue to do to it the unutterable things we have been doing” (Rosengarten in McWilliams, 1989, p. 7)

*Chatooga County, Georgia, 1974* (Fig. 34) captures a barren meadow littered with debris. A furrow runs through the center, running out of the image and into the viewer at the bottom of the frame. The scene could almost be mistaken for a Civil War battlefield – a left over foxhole or bunker full of the wreckage of long-vanished soldiers. However, another battle has been waged here, that of man versus nature. This is a sterile and denuded landscape, possibly as a result of strip mining or deforestation. The land has been abused and discarded, populated only with the garbage of those who abused it.

One of the enduring witnesses to these activities are the Southern live oaks. “Trees are McWilliams’ continuing primary subject” (Rosengarten in McWilliams, 1989, p. 2). The grand, spreading oaks of the Southern landscape are one of its most widely-recognized natural features. McWilliams titled his book of Southern landscape photographs, *The Land of Deepest Shade*, referring, in part, to the refuge from the heat these giants provide. However, these trees also live for over a hundred years and, therefore, have born witness to both the negative and positive events of Southern history. The trees are much like the Southerner himself, deeply tied to the landscape, influenced and marked by events past and present.

*Alabama, 1975* (Fig. 35) is perhaps one of McWilliams most profound images. At the center of the photograph is a giant oak with a strong, straight trunk, and wide-reaching canopy. At first glance, the canopy appears to be festooned with silver strands
of Spanish moss that adorn many oaks in the South. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that it is not moss, but something else. The ground below the oak is also strewn with the web-like debris. “It is the waste product from a cotton gin, the effluent blown out the back of a building where cotton seeds are removed from the lint. The poor tree standing in the foreground cannot get out of the way. Being rooted means it has to submit” (Rosengarten in McWilliams, 1989, p. 6)

In a region whose primary industry was agricultural crops, the crop which reigned supreme was cotton. The cotton industry got its start near the end of the 18th century in Georgia and South Carolina (Cooper and Terrill, 2002, p. 180). It quickly became the staple crop of the South. “By 1860 cotton fields stretched from North Carolina in the east to Texas in the west and from Tennessee down to Florida…At the beginning of the century just over 73,000 bales were produced; by 1820 that number had almost quintupled, to just over 335,000 bales” (Cooper and Terrill, 2002, pp. 180-181). The invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney allowed for this production of ever-increasing cotton harvests by providing a more efficient way to separate the seeds from the cotton. However, the enormous amount of cotton grown and processed on Southern land took its toll.

“The injury cotton has done to the southern land cannot be attributed to the tailings from the ginning process, which can be vacuumed or swept away. Concentrated in one place, however, they allude to the extractive nature of cotton farming, a process that can be as ruinous to the land as strip mining” (Rosengarten in McWilliams, 1989, pp. 6-7). This is perhaps McWilliams most iconic image of the South. It tells of not only of the South’s landscape, but of its colonial, Civil War and Reconstruction history, as
well as its dark record of slavery, share-cropping and too often disastrous attempts at industrialization.

Rosengarten sums it up perfectly when he says, “…the landscapes of John McWilliams…show us where we find ourselves” (Rosengarten, 1989, p. 2). For the Southerner, the history of the region they call home is inescapable. It lives on in the land of their ancestors. The landscape all too often bears the mark of that history, constantly reminding the Southerner it is a part of them. John McWilliams’ photography has brought him home to the South, and made him a part of its narrative. “I always kept coming back there (to McClellanville). To me, it’s one of the few places that is relatively wild. When I was doing the landscapes that deal with analogy and irony I was really trying to make some sense of the landscape outside myself…But going back to McClellanville, there’s something very personal about that” (Rankin, 1989, p. 14)
Epilogue

“Photographs are about memory…providing pictures to fill voids, illustrating our collective memory. So they are an excellent means with which to trigger concern and soothe anxieties about history and place…” (Lippard, 1997, p. 20). What photographers William Christenberry, Sally Mann and John McWilliams have accomplished is to contribute to the “collective memory” of their community, and to help reconstruct the national memory of the South to one that is more representative of the people who live there. “It has been photography…which has arguably had the most sustained, wide-ranging, and indelible role in chronicling how the region has perceived itself and been understood (or misunderstood) by others…” (Dugan, 1996, p. 14).

Through their images of the Southern landscape, photographers William Christenberry, Sally Mann and John McWilliams consider what it means to be from the South. The very choice of the land as their subject testifies to both the importance of the land to the Southerner as well as its venerated place in Southern culture. The photographs these artists create allow both the viewer and the photographer to explore and comment on the themes of home, family and community, as well as the distinctive history, which the Southern land signifies.

Another American landscape photographer, Mark Klett, has said that the objective of his work is to “lessen the distance one often feels when looking at landscape photographs…The longer I work, the more important it is to me to make photographs that
tell my story as a participant, and not just an observer of the land” (in Lippard, 1997, p. 182). These Southern landscape photographers achieve just that. Because they are photographing the landscapes in which they have spent their lives, the resulting images are unavoidably inculcated with their personal stories. And they share those stories, Southern stories, with all of us.
References


Bibliography


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Appendix A: The Photographs
Figure 1. House, Stewart, Alabama, 1962. © William Christenberry

Figure 2. Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama, 1974. © William Christenberry

Figure 3. Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama, 1982. © William Christenberry

Figure 4. Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama, 1984. © William Christenberry

Figure 5. Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama, 1991. © William Christenberry

Figure 6. Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama, 1994. © William Christenberry
Appendix A (Continued)

*Figure 7.* Kudzu with Storm Cloud, near Akron, Alabama, 1981. © William Christenberry

*Figure 8.* High Kudzu, near Akron, Alabama, 1978. © William Christenberry

*Figure 9.* Kudzu Devouring Building, near Greensboro, Alabama, 2004. © William Christenberry

*Figure 10.* Green Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama, 1973. © William Christenberry

*Figure 11.* Green Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama, 1978. © William Christenberry

*Figure 12.* Green Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama, 1989. © William Christenberry

*Figure 13.* Green Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama, 1997. © William Christenberry
Appendix A (Continued)

Figure 14. Green Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama, 2004. © William Christenberry

Figure 15. Side of Palmist Building, Havana Junction, Alabama, 1971. © William Christenberry

Figure 16. Palmist Building, Havana Junction, Alabama, 1981. © William Christenberry

Figure 17. Site of Palmist Building, Havana Junction, Alabama, 1988. © William Christenberry

Figure 18. White Door, near Stewart, Alabama, 1977. © William Christenberry

Figure 19. Emmett, Jessie, Virginia, 1992. © Sally Mann

Figure 20. Untitled. © Sally Mann
Appendix A (Continued)

Figure 21. Untitled. © Sally Mann

Figure 22. Untitled. © Sally Mann

Figure 23. Untitled. © Sally Mann

Figure 24. Untitled. © Sally Mann

Figure 25. Untitled. © Sally Mann

Figure 26. Blackville, South Carolina, 1974. © John McWilliams

Figure 27. Dearing, Georgia, 1974. © John McWilliams
Appendix A (Continued)

Figure 28. Eatonton, Georgia, 1973. © John McWilliams

Figure 29. Sumter County, Georgia, 1973. © John McWilliams

Figure 30. Crowfield Plantation, 1974. © John McWilliams

Figure 31. Oconee River, Georgia, 1973. © John McWilliams

Figure 32. Washington County, Georgia, 1975. © John McWilliams

Figure 33. Copperhill, Tennessee, 1977. © John McWilliams

Figure 34. Chatooga County, Georgia, 1974. © John McWilliams
Appendix A (Continued)

Figure 35. Alabama, 1975. © John McWilliams