

Expression

These days it usually happens around three in the morning. That feeling that makes me sit bolt upright in bed. Every decision, every mistake, every choice, every action I have ever made or not made, taken or not taken, comes rushing back into my mind. I question, analyze and rework my entire existence. The outcome of such a rush to self-awareness is usually not a favorable one. Perhaps it's due to the fatigued mind necessary for three a.m. self-evaluation, but I find myself painfully aware of the fragile nature of human existence. I find it's best to try to roll over to my other side, flip the pillow for a cooler place to rest my head and try to forget the sudden revelations. In a 1936 story for Esquire magazine entitled "Handle with Care", F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning." In my photography, I am presenting a character that is perpetually experiencing his dark night of the soul.

"But how do we recognize ourselves? How can man know himself? He is a dark and hidden thing; whereas the hare is said to have seven skins, man can take off seven times seventy skins and still not be able to say: "That is you as you really are, that is no longer mere appearance." Besides, it is a painful and dangerous undertaking to dig down into oneself in this way and to descend violently and directly into the shaft of one's being. How easily he could injure himself doing this, so that no doctor could cure him." Friedrich Nietzsche, a critical response to the dictum gnothi seauton ("know thyself") inscribed over the entrance to Apollo's temple at Delphi.

There is a part of fundamental human awareness that we bury deep within us. It is the part of the mind that reminds us that we are mortal,

weak, fallible, arrogant, ignorant and alone. It is not a part of the mind we choose to visit frequently. It's a bad neighborhood, in a synaptic nerve sense. Personally I find myself confronting this zone of dark thoughts whenever I manage to make a mistake of any kind. I hate mistakes and don't tolerate them well. So, when I slip up, as I am prone to do, three a.m. thoughts are like an opening floodgate of negative self-awareness. It can take me weeks to get through these periods of self-reflection. When I was younger I operated on a strict method of calculated self-destruction. As soon as I noticed the floodgates were opening I'd take drastic action. I felt that I might spend two weeks slipping into depression; gradually sinking to rock bottom.

In order to cut out this two-week slide, I'd drink heavily and physically destroy myself, thus reaching rock bottom in a single night instead of 14 days. You have to tear yourself down to the ground in order to rebuild yourself. If you don't re-do the foundation, then you're just repairing a shaky structure that will fall sooner than you'd like. I don't feel the need to rip myself down to my very foundation nearly as often these days. It's a desire I have maybe once every six months, a simple need for self-destruction. I look at that deep dark corner of my mind and in a way I embrace it. It's a box I climb into and spend some time knocking my head against its walls. That's my way of confronting it. I won't say it's the healthiest approach to take.

I feel much of society is driven by a desire to run from the dark corner of the mind. Mankind is a tiny part of the great scope of worldly existence, so he climbs mountains, builds towering buildings, conquers other races, launches himself into space. No matter the stated reason for the conquests or advancements, I believe the underlying force that drives someone to excel comes from a deep-seated fear that everything contained in that dark corner of the mind is true. By doing something incredible, something brilliant, something timeless, a person can somehow prove they are different, greater, or more important than the rest of the species. For many the drive to excel is a cry against their own knowledge of inherent weaknesses.

In my photography I am dealing with a character that has, over time, acquired the name "Mud Man." I portray the character in all the photographs, covered in a layer of dried, multiple-colored mud. I present the character as he exists in public spaces and as he exists in private spaces. There are aspects of myself in the Mud Man, but the Mud Man is not intended to be a self-portrait. He is a character that has been consumed by his knowledge of his weaknesses, his fears, his inadequacies, and his own mortality. Instead of using this knowledge as an impetus to succeed, he has acquiesced to his own futility. He lives in a world that he has readily accepted and while he still questions his own existence, he never acts to change any thing. Society is intended to keep a great part of itself in check. Not everyone can be a leader, there has to be someone to follow, and mud

man fills that role. This unchallenging life has led him to over-analyze himself, to look into the mirror one too many times. He has fallen into a trap that life offers each of us.

Perhaps the Mud Man can serve as a cautionary example of the dangers of over self-analysis. It's dangerous to be too self-aware. Something might snap that makes it impossible to elevate yourself above your current state. The Mud Man sees every action he takes as futile. He won't ever kill himself because he fears his own death. He won't ever embrace risk, because it threatens the safety of his world. He destroys himself mentally and physically because he can't find any other way to move past his weaknesses. He can't connect with others, because he is so wrapped up in his own failings he feels he has nothing to offer anyone else. He occupies a world that allows him to function, but also allows his complete disconnect from the world around him.

My photographs depict the Mud Man in either public or private spaces. In public, he has no interaction with the people in the world around him is absent. There is no connection formed between himself and his surrounding environment. Just as he fails to respond to the world, the world does not seem to acknowledge him. The viewer clearly sees the cracked and fragile exterior of the character, but the people in the photographs with the Mud Man don't respond to this obvious external cracking. I portray the mud man as a coat and tie wearing corporate person because I feel that the corporate world is the most likely

environment to find the Mud Man. In a large corporate world it is possible to avoid risks, toe the line and follow orders. It provides everyone a chance to show up, do your job, get your check and go home. If you are lucky you get to come back and do it all over again next week. It is an artificial world of piped-in air, cubicles that aren't rooms, windows that don't open and plants that aren't real. It is the world the Mud Man exists in. He doesn't feel at home, he goes there because that's what we're told we should do with our lives. He doesn't fit in, but he doesn't know why.

“You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies – which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world - what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do” – Conrad

In the private spaces, the Mud Man is still disconnected from his world. In the spaces where most people find comfort and serenity, there is present a sense of displacement. There is some visual element contained in the image that distorts these private spaces, either subtly or overtly, indicating the Mud Man is not an integrated part of his own world. The private spaces also feature nudes of the character, representing him at his most histrionic, for this is the time when he is most alone and free to act out his angst.

There is an intentional theatricality to all of the images. The histrionic nature of the nudes combined with the visual elements of draped plastic hint at the idea of a staged production. The coat and tie costumed

Mud Man of the public spaces has the quality of a work of performance art. The Mud Man is a character involved in his own world, his own private stage. He acts out his feelings, not for the world he occupies, but for himself. The viewer is given a glimpse into his personal play. The viewer sees the mud covered face and body; the occupants of the Mud Man's world do not. The mud is a mask donned for the performance. It is a mask that allows the character a visual metaphor to demonstrate the internal fracturing and breaking down of his psyche.

Because of the nature of the images, there is often a desire to find a narrative theme. The images are intended to be viewed as individual moments taken from a larger life. They imply that this is not a single day, rather it is hundreds of days.

“He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination – you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate . . . Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency.” – Conrad

The untitled video piece is the only work with a definite narrative structure, it is also the work that is most theatrical in nature. The video is a depiction of one of the contributing factors that led to the creation of the mud man- His Day Job. He begins his workday at the sound of a chime. He fills out a performance evaluation, dropping it into his out box. Much to his dismay, the form slowly slides into his in box. He retrieves it and continues

to work, the cycle repeating over and over again. Before he has time to become too frustrated with the situation, another chime sounds, telling him it is time to take a well-deserved break. Another chime signals the end of the break and a return to work. Back at his desk, the mud man continues to work on the same form until his frustration builds and he runs from his desk. The chime has not sounded. It is not time to rest, but still he runs. The hallways grow ever narrower, confining and trapping him. Finally, he turns a corner only to find himself boxed in. He sinks to the floor as the lights dim.

The work chime sounds again and the light rises on his desk. The familiar carpet backdrop is gone, replaced by an odd backdrop filled with light and shadowy forms. The mud man stares at his desk as the work chime sounds again. Slowly he rises and moves to his desk as the chime continues to sound. The evaluation form from earlier has been replaced by a manila envelope. After debating exactly what to do with this new intrusion on his day, the mud man slowly slices open the envelope. The letter opener slips, slicing into the mud man's hand. He staggers back from the desk and upon seeing mud, not blood flow from the cut on his hand; he vomits onto the floor. But all that comes out is a fine white powder. He collapses to the floor. The work bell chimes as he looks to his desk.

"I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe." – Conrad

There are victims of the world, but there are many more who are not victims, rather they are willing accomplices in their own slow destruction. The mud man is in part a creature of his own creation, just as all people are a product of choices made or not made, actions taken or not taken. The Mud Man has made choices that have led him to a point of paralysis, unable to choose to change his situation, and unable to act on any of the knowledge he has of himself.

My philosophy of life as exhibited in these images has developed over time, influenced by a wide variety of outside sources. I deal with issues that are relatively timeless. Man's insecurities, mortality, and fear are hardly virgin territory as far as issues are concerned. I like to find my philosophy in the pages of a Daschle Hammett novel or a work by John D. MacDonald. I draw upon the writings of a long line of pulp authors. The stories are often similar, the writing often unpolished, but I find universal truths on many of the yellowed pages of the novels of Jim Thompson, James M. Cain, Ross MacDonal, John D. MacDonal and Raymond Chandler. These authors play a direct role in my creative process. Of course, they were not writing in a vacuum, just as I'm not photographing in a void. Hammett created the American hard-boiled detective genre. Chandler elevated Hammett's style to the level of literature. Ross MacDonal took Chandler and Hammett's styles and infused them with a psychological depth. Each built upon the other. Of course, Hammett's writing was based on real-life time spent as a detective as well as the early

English detective stories as well as the American author, Edgar Allen Poe's detective story, the Murder's at the Rue Morgue. Narratives created by these author's do not play themselves out in my photographs, but they do lend insight into the human character that I draw upon on some level. Of course, all of the writers mentioned above read other authors, philosophers and pundits to help them form their own world views.

There are written sources I draw upon that have more standing within the literary community. Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald have all had an impact on my ideas of the world. I can't claim to have read all of their writings, I've read little of Hemingway and Faulkner, but I carry them with me. Fitzgerald's letters and notebooks hold more interest for me than the majority of his prose. In my current work, the influence of Joseph Conrad is more prevalent than any other author. Conrad's keen insights into the deepest recesses of man's soul have an authenticity to them that I find startlingly honest. Heart of Darkness is the Conrad novella most people are familiar with, but "Amy", "An Outpost of Progress", "The Nigger of the Narcissus", "The Secret Agent" and several of Conrad's other writings deal with very similar themes.

Then there is the world of radio, television and film. For many a degree in RTF stood for "Rather Than Fail." That wasn't the case where I was concerned. It was an all-consuming passion, dissecting and digesting other peoples' words and images. I learned of Kurosawa, Bergman, Wilder, Keaton, Chaplin, Hawks, Huston, Wenders, Hitchcock, Kubrick, Lynch,

Frankenheimer, Gilliam and so many others. Films are entertainment and can entertain while making you think and feel. Too often a film becomes so high-minded you become aware the point the film is trying to make is hanging over you, pressing down on you like a great weight the entire time you are in the theater. The great films make their point subtly, they linger with you for days, months and years. You can watch them again and again without tiring. The American directors remain my favorites for their ability to pace a film. Not to sound unenlightened, but the European way is often a little slow for my tastes.

Comedies are often treated as the bastard child of the film world. They might make lots of money, but when it comes time to recognize the kids for their efforts, comedies are left out in the cold. This is understandable in some regards. Visually, comedies are usually less inventive in their lighting and composition. There is a theory in film comedy that says things are funnier when you can see everything. The wider the shot, the flatter the lighting, the more freedom the audience has to concentrate on the actors. There are comedies that I love that subscribe to this theory. They are not high-minded affairs. They strive to no greater aspirations than to entertain. They are just extremely well written, well acted and damn funny. Stripes, Caddyshack, Arthur, The Jerk, Airplane, Marx Brothers films, Strange Brew, Murder By Death and so many more film comedies fall into this category. There are however some comedies that do more than just settle for the wide shot and flat lighting formula.

Time Bandits, Raising Arizona, Young Frankenstein, Manhattan Murder Mystery, Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid, Some Like it Hot, The Frighteners, and The Big Lebowski come to mind.

Comedy is an important part of my life and my art. It is also one of the hardest factors to discuss. Comedy is not always understood, and as soon as it is explained it loses those intangible qualities that made it funny in the first place. There is humor in my work, but what one person finds funny another might describe as poignant, or sad, or melancholy. It lacks definition. The humor is there if you approach it from the right mental viewpoint. One thing that can adequately be explained is the influence of Buster Keaton on the work. Keaton was known in the world of silent film comedians as being The Great Stoneface. The world would collapse around him and he regarded it all with the same deadpan look. There was an innocence in his face that combined with a certain world weary quality. The Mud Man has adopted much of Keaton's stoic look.

Pacing and timing are extremely important to me, but with the still image it becomes much more difficult to control. I can try and capture a specific moment, the moment that will be most effective in conveying my thoughts, but it is always a struggle. People will watch films and remember a certain image that embodies the film. Often times what people remember never actually occurred in the picture. Often times, the viewer remembers an amalgamation of two or three different shots. A memory is created of an image that never actually occurred. When my work is hanging on a

wall, the viewer is free to deal with each image on their own terms and at their own pace. I lose that control of timing and pacing that I cherish. Because of this loss of control, I'm experimenting with video again. I'm trying to re-tap into the film and video background I had moved away from for the past few years. I'm trying to reconnect with the filmmakers I was inspired by in the past. There is an attempt to convey the distorted reality of the *Mud Man* in a visual language developed by Robert Wiene, Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau in the early German silent cinema.

While I am a photographer, I feel less comfortable citing photographers as direct influences on my visual approach. Much of the way I see the world is due to direct influence from film and television. I do know that with increased exposure to the world of photography I have been able to condense my thoughts from multiple shots and multiple angles into single photographs. There are other photographers who have constructed photos that have the feel of film stills. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series is notable because of her ability to construct a scene that seems familiar. The viewer knows what she is referencing even though she has completely constructed her reality. She uses these cinematic clichéd characters to comment on societal roles for women. In some ways my work operates along the same lines. It is not my goal to be gender specific as Sherman is in her work.

“Any work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of

justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth,
manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.” – Joseph Conrad

I hope that my work in some way manages to demonstrate some fundamental truths of man’s existence. The corporate looking Mud Man is recognizable as a businessman to those within and without the business world. Those on the outside of the business community will hopefully see the truth in the Mud Man just as clearly as those on the inside. The truth of the character should not be limited to simply a businessman’s truth. I think it is something fundamental to all mankind, I also think the coat and tie crowd might need the direct example of the Mud Man.