

**LOCATE/DISLOCATE**  
An Exhibition of Haiku Videos

by

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

J. Colin Carney

## **Abstract**

My work is concerned with perception and presentness. Using digital video I am employing a notion of “perceptualism” put forward by artist Jack Chambers.

Acknowledging HD television and high speed internet, this work challenges the pace and expectations of a contemporary screen event. It ranges in focus from the domestic to the rural, the intimate and sublime. These works, structured in various conceptual configurations of the 5 - 7 - 5 haiku poem, form an immersive gallery installation.

Seventeen haiku videos in this series stretch a primary perceptual impact of various circumstances using superimpositions and quick edits in order to reconsider an immediate present and evoke a sense of wonder.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Dedication**

With all my heart, I dedicate this work to Christine, who has supported me with unwavering strength and selflessness. I am yours. And to my boys, Aidan and Finn. Stay young, wild and joyful.

## Table of Contents

List of Images	vii
Thesis Support Paper	1 - 21
Bibliography	22 - 23
Thesis Images	24 - 27

## List of Images

1. *Destination*, 2009, digital video, 24 seconds (looped)
2. *Elsewhere*, 2009, digital video, 17 seconds (looped)
3. *The In Between*, 2009, digital video, 24 seconds (looped)
4. *The Camp*, 2008, digital video, 17 seconds (looped)
5. *Journey*, 2008, digital video, 17 seconds (looped)
6. *Intermittent*, 2008, digital video, 26 seconds (looped)
7. *Listening Room*, 2009, digital video, 19 seconds (looped)

## Introduction

Over the past two years my studio work has moved from drawing, painting and printmaking to an almost exclusively digital practice. A logically charted path will be discussed that develops an understanding of how the work evolved. It is primary to discuss the key influential instance which marked a paradigm shift in my studio practice.

In the winter of 2007, I attended a screening of Jack Chambers' 1969 film *Circle*, my second time seeing the film. Ten years prior, the film yielded precious little intrigue. Upon revisiting, *Circle* has had a profound impact on this new series of videos and continues to have resonance. Some of the interest lies in a sympathetic encounter with Chambers' work now as I see it as a father of two. Largely, it is a kinship of subject. Chambers' practice, as now mine, made acute considerations of immediate surroundings which include elements of domestic, urban and rural life in southern Ontario.

*Circle* is a twenty-eight minute film with three distinct movements. The central movement in the film is a year long observation of the artist's backyard, played out over sequential four second exposures. Each exposure varies only by the handheld camera work of Chambers standing in approximately the same spot just outside his back door. The amateur aesthetic of the film is disarming. The duration of the film is compelling. It is relentless in honesty and intimacy. Chambers' ability to command the viewer's attention is remarkable in *Circle*. The film demands careful observation and patience.

There is no soundtrack to interfere with the atmosphere of these sparsely moving images. It is evocative of poetry and was once referred to by critic Gene Youngblood as an “extended haiku”.<sup>1</sup> The notion of a filmic haiku experience captivates me because it suggests a possible bridge between my own interests in the written word and experimental video. I have subsequently chosen to directly embrace it in *LOCATE/ DISLOCATE*.

## Early Work

A large part of my work has been concerned with a visual poetry. The earliest of this work engaged the concept in relation to nostalgia and artifact. An extended series sought to bridge the 'personal' and 'universal' experiences of adolescence using banal objects as markers in cryptic storytelling. This took the form of drawings, paintings, lithographs and monotypes. A connection between 'personal' and 'universal' was ultimately subverted by the prominence of a highly specific narrative, locating the work in an autobiography. Although the series is quite different from the video haikus, commonality can be drawn with it. The banal content within the previous work is treated as immediate, authentic and is concerned with locating the viewer's presentness in relation to the pastness of the artifact.

The earliest of the videos in my graduate work were in direct response to an experience with *Circle*. Intended to be gallery projected loops, the videos explore 'Chambers-esque' superimpositions in various configurations. A relationship between film, photography and manual printmaking is explored in this period of work. In these video sketches, layering and postproduction are initially investigated, helping to establish a thematic aesthetic which now connects my various works.

Underlying all of my video work is an historical and technical interest in moving images. The earliest pieces are concerned with various formal properties specific to black and white moving images. For videos such as *Two Way Drive*, the original high-definition

colour footage has been highly aestheticized in postproduction to resemble black and white avant-garde films of the 1950's and 1960's. *Two Way Drive* is contrasted and gritty, intended to be in an aesthetic conversation with this historic genre.

Works which immediately followed these black and white videos were also manipulated during postproduction. They are altered to look similar to Super 8 colour film, an amateur quality film which was adopted by many early experimental filmmakers.

*Naecocean* is my video palindrome which is intended to look similar to the films which have informed it. Early work by American experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage is a consideration for the look of my video about balance in the coming and going of a wave. As well, *Naecocean* marks the first instance of adopting a literary device in my work.

The 1959 film entitled *Window Water Baby Moving* by Brakhage was an important filmic influence in Jack Chambers' works which, in turn, has influenced my practice. *Window Water Baby Moving* is a poetic edit of the Brakhage's first child being born. It is graphic, sentimental, romantic and raw. The film exhibits fearless honesty and becomes profoundly more than simple story telling. A viewer is arrested in a state of wonder for twelve minutes. Chambers wrote extensively about this wondrous state when defining "perceptualism". The effect is something extremely immersive; bodily, emotionally and spiritually. This immersion is important to the success of the haiku videos. Each short video engages the viewer in a dense instance of intimate and disciplined looking.

## **Duration and Scale**

Within the development of this series, the idea of duration has become one of two key considerations in my practice. Over the span of a year, the length of each final edit in the work has greatly varied. This series of haiku videos however establishes a bracket between seventeen and thirty seconds. This measure forcibly disciplines the work as brief, ensuring that it echos the compacted essence of a highly considered written haiku.

I play with time for two main purposes. Firstly, linear time must be broken apart in most works in order to sustain a moment without any real resolution of action. In this way the necessity of a narrative in each work is subverted, emphasizing the immediacy of the image. Rather than instantly reading into the video, a viewer is held in a primary experiential circumstance. Presentness is paramount. Through this consideration the work is afforded many configurations.

Secondly, it is intended that each work lasts just long enough to be the start of a thoughtful experience. By employing repetition, superimposition, speed alteration and quick edits, a visual anxiety and calm are evoked. A viewers' vantage point is at times easily located or completely dislocated. The elemental fragments of each haiku are at times straightforward and accessible and at times completely obliterated by postproduction, placing the viewer in an insecure relationship with them.

Each work in this series is an event that lives within a seven inch LCD screen. The choice of this display relates to intimacy. Intimacy is an important thematic undercurrent in influential works such as *Circle* and *Window Water Baby Moving*. Much has been discovered about my own interests through these films. The video haikus are not overarching political statements or grand editorials. These are highly focussed works about being in specific places, in specific relationships and invite the viewer to immerse themselves in each work, however sure or unsure their position may be. To help coerce this ideal read a small intimate screen which requires close range viewing, such as demanded by the small LCD screen, seemed best suited.

The relationship of these works to painting is by no means incidental. Jack Chambers, Michael Snow, Bill Viola, and Mark Lewis are influential examples of artists working with pictorial and painterly considerations (colour, composition, texture, etc.) in time-based work. With this in mind, viewers can approach the haiku videos with some similar critical agendas as they might for reading paintings. There are two key points I wish to make about this relationship to painting regarding my own work.

Firstly, these works are intended to be sustained situations. Using passive takes by the camera, referencing the “long take” in cinematic tradition, the viewer is led to reflect and absorb an understanding of a moving image which has no narrative. As in painting, the compositional information is presented at first glance but the content of the work requires a duration of this image. David Company says of Lewis’ gallery installed

projections, “most of his films last no longer than one might spend contemplating a painting.”<sup>2</sup> In this way the video haikus, directly relate to Lewis.

The compact nature of the haiku itself takes this notion even further. Constraining the work to be no longer than thirty seconds addresses a contemporary need for speed in being far more efficient with the viewer’s attention than Lewis’ measure of two or five minutes. The video haikus do so yet retain a mission statement demanding thoughtful looking and deeper contemplation.

Secondly, the viewer’s physical nearness to the work, as in painting, is considered in the conceptual framework of the installation. Often in these works, repetitious and/or contradictory motion is used. On a small screen at close range this can harbor a capacity to induce feelings of anxiety. In some cases a vertigo effect or motion sickness comes to mind. In other works, stillness or anti-action is the agitative agent for anxiety. In either scenario, the viewer is subject to the kind of physical and sensory charge I first encountered in viewing Brakhage’s *Window Water Baby Moving*. Though this new work embodies an intimacy, the viewer is invited to be further complicated in an anxious or insecure relationship with it.

On one basic level, the assembled videos should make sense but refuse such logic. They contain identifiable imagery but are infused with interruptions. Over the duration of the work a “slow burn” occurs which inevitably leads to a submission by the viewer to

release the constraints of logical space and time, and is thus held in a state of “pre-reflexive thought” as theorized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

## Perception

All of my interests in this video series relate to perception and presentness. Jack Chambers wrote about perception and experience as it related to his film work. Before speaking to Chambers' notion of perception, the theory of pre-reflexive thought, as put forward by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty must first be discussed.

Merleau-Ponty makes a key differentiation between reflexive and pre-reflexive thought in his "Embodiment Theory", included in his 1962 publication entitled *Phenomenology of Perception*. As John Halworth observes about this theory, pre-reflexive thought is suggested to be "below the level of conscious awareness."<sup>3</sup> He further points to Merleau-Ponty's argument that, "Primary meaning is reached through co-existing with the world, in distinction to intellectual meaning reached through analysis."<sup>4</sup> This idea of primacy has been embraced in many cases by visual artists as Halworth goes on further to talk about. The experiential value of a work, outside of its analytical contexts and historical implications, exploring the purity of experience and the initial impact of that experience are matters which excited Chambers, and is therefore of great importance to me.

Chambers wrote in 1969 and 1972 about "perceptual reality" which he later referred to as "perceptualism". Historian Fred Camper says of Chambers' writings, "The articles are dense and theoretical, but one of his goals seems to have been to address the moment of perception before the mind is able to interpret a scene, thus placing the viewer in 'a

state of receptive passivity that somehow releases a higher...sense.”<sup>5</sup> Chambers was certainly interested in the spiritual implications of this kind of perception and intriguingly places this pre-reflexive ‘passive reception’ as above consciousness, contrary to Merleau-Ponty’s original statement. Chambers talks about the coexistence of humankind and nature. He understood his immediate time and place by entering into a symbiotic dialogue with it. In his terms then, attempting to “imitate” this experience through “art-craft” is something he called “perceptual-realism”.<sup>6</sup>

Merleau-Ponty and Chambers’ writings relate to perception and presentness in this series of video haikus, best described in terms of meditation. Interest in sustained circumstances of pre-reflexive, perceptual impact stems from a meditative practice in my daily life. It began on various directed retreats with the Jesuits at St Ignatius in Guelph. The spiritual retreats were focussed on the Ignatian practice of meditation (related to Eastern traditions such as Zen Buddhism and practiced in Western Catholicism). These were rural, secluded and silent situations. Experiencing an important stillness at the hermitage and Loyola House later set a purposeful foundation for meditation in my life and has helped me to better understand the nature of my looking and seeing in art practice.

This important experience directly informs the “how” and “what” I shoot in video. Consequently, these video haikus seek to bring the viewer toward a similarly open state of meditation, focussing the viewer on a presentness, a perceptual reality about which Chambers was so careful to articulate.

## The Haiku

From the Eastern influence of meditational practice, my appropriation of the traditional Japanese haiku poem parallels a similar logic. This poetry is elementally rooted in imagery and contradictions. The idea of making a 5 - 7 - 5 conceptual haiku stems also in part from practical discoveries about working in video. In a contemporary context, the viewer's attention is a precarious thing especially related to screen-based events. Competing with the instantaneous realities of television and computer cultures, artistic video must be innovative in its efficiency as a communicative vehicle. The haiku is an incredibly efficient written form. By extending its structure into the video realm, a possible solution may be derived. These haiku video works are quick to reach their intended outcomes.

The haiku also lends itself to Chambers' notion of "perceptualism" in being rooted as experiential, concise and focussed, with seasonal notations and "cut" contradictions. Using this structure, duration, layering, and cohesion are explored while varying the 5 - 7 - 5 metering from video to video.

In a work such as *The In Between*, the haiku measure is adopted to represent velocity, moving in units of a thousand percent. The video plays five thousand times fast forward, then mirrors seven thousand times reversed and returns forward at five thousand times the original speed of the shot. The soundtrack, serving as a counter balance to speed, is made from the local sound from the apartment. It is slowed in measurements of ten

percent. Sound advances at fifty percent, retreats at seventy percent and again moves forward at fifty percent of its original speed, matching the transitions of the accelerated image to mark the three stanzas. *The In Between* is enabled by these choices to hold the viewer in an observation of strange light play. It is a video poem about five to six thirty in the morning in the romanticized squalor of a Dundas West apartment.

In a work entitled *The Camp* the haiku structure is applied to the layering of footage on the timeline of the video itself. For this work, three key clips have been discerned as essential elements of the circumstance. Each element becomes a layer with altered opacity. This occurs all at once in a seventeen second edit. By playing with the transparency of each clip I am able to create a superimposition that is provocative and almost musical. The collision of these elements in repetition creates chaos with an all at once action onscreen. The chaotic activity later seems lyrical when repetition is at last anticipated. Journeying through this short work, a viewer may unpack its elements in meaningful thought well beyond the completion of the video.

## Process

One of the most influential artists on this work in terms of production and technique is Mark Lewis. His works are very much formal about the language of film and video. Works such as *Golden Rod* (2006) and *Prater Hauptallee, Dawn and Dusk* (2008) are evidence of his incredible attention to production value. Technical considerations in his decidedly rich filmic scenarios are virtuosic. Every work boldly demonstrates his control and precision with a camera.

New possibilities afforded by HD camcorders can now push amateur film work into an unprecedented visual experience. With this in mind, I am concerned with using the features of HD technology and editing software to create my own precise and lush works. As artist and writer Sky Glabush said recently in a conversation with me about Stan Douglas, “No matter how conceptually dense his works may be, they always become something spectacular to look at.” This is a particularly poignant challenge and responsibility. Video artists must now be extremely scrupulous of visual competence and quality in their works. So with this in mind, I have taken great care in acquiring skill with both the HD camcorder and the editing platform Adobe Premiere CS3. Over the past two years, I have become comfortable with these tools in such a way that permits me to be both informed and playful with my production method.

Most of the works in *LOCATE/DISLOCATE* are similarly produced. They begin as a series of singular long takes on a digital camcorder shot on the same day and in the

same conditions. Over the past two years I have been collecting a volume of situational video footage which I use as a collection of information to later make superimpositions or various edits of fragments from the situation. I have been busy making notations of places and circumstances that interest me in some way.

Sometimes incidental movement is an active element in the shot using handheld pans and zooms. Other times I intend to remove myself completely from the shot. Strapping the camera to a vehicle or using a tripod to keep a steady fixed gaze for the duration of each segment are choices to counter with. The controlled shots are further enhanced by steady-shot technologies within the camera itself. Moving between these strategies the camera collects the subject and elements of the viewers' anticipated vantage point. By repeating this gathering the options available become numerous for postproduction.

Rather than edit these together in sequential fashion, I combine the footage in a variety of ways to help elasticize the perceptual impact of my subject. In some instances I isolate a particularly resonant moment then embed it as a repetitive element. An example of this is *Intermittent*. In this video, the same footage is repeated but slowed, hurried, reversed and expanded then piled in transparency marking three distinct visual stanzas. The footage itself was taken during a rainstorm from a car. The final edit uses the windshield as a stabilizing reference to connect all variations.

Using varying opacities, the videos end up as an all-at-once moving image. In some ways this is a kind of video cubism. After altering the relative transparency of each clip

the order of layers are considered and further adjustments are made to the opacity and contrast of each layered element. Doing this removes the dominance of any singular component in the new composition. In *Journey* the viewer sees both the fore and aft from a car on a wintery road simultaneously, without being committed to looking mostly ahead or behind.

## Sound

*LOCATE/DISLOCATE* is comprised of seventeen video works, eight of which are silent while nine have soundtracks. Each soundtrack in this series is a manipulated hybrid of local sounds gathered from each location when the video was originally shot. Using the audio timeline in Adobe Premiere CS3, sound is treated with similar postproduction considerations as with the video footage. I overlay, mix, reduce, speed or slow the sound to create an organic new noise which serves as both a truth of each circumstance as well as a metronome, enhancing the rhythm of seventeen measures in a haiku.

In *Listening Place*, the sound of a door opening cuts the stillness of a basement den in the first stanza. The second and third stanzas, darkened versions of the same place, are full of music and scrambled conversations. The music is tripped up into a collision with itself at various points of the evening's playlist. The sound further indicates the emotive change in this space as denoted by the light shift. The soundtrack assists in developing a celebratory circumstance as well as further punctuating the seventeen measures of the work.

*Intermittent* however has no sound. The absence of sound in this work operates as an implied soundtrack. Wiper blades traversing across a rainy windshield evokes the known sound of sloshing and the quiet whine of the electric motor driving them in action.

The footage of the blades literally stands in as a metronome. Where sound is not literal in this series, each silent work is otherwise full of implied sound.

By repeating and manipulating sounds or extending silences, the haiku videos refuse to resolve in any absolute narrative. The soundtracks and silences found in LOCATE/ DISLOCATE are highly considered, designed to be intrinsic and related to the authentic experiences each work is depicting. This aligns itself well with Chambers' notion of perceptual reality and 'art-craft'.

## **Installation**

When installed, seventeen haiku video works converse with one another in a large darkened gallery space. Small LCD screens are dotted in an evenly spaced linear constellation around the room. Soundtracks are contained by headphones. Each work is surrounded by a void of empty wall and relative darkness. Standing in the midst of this series, a viewer is left with a number of possibilities.

To understand and appreciate the work in this exhibition is to be near each piece. When in the centre of the room, no soundtrack is offered and minimal visual information about each screen work can be ascertained. By design, the success of the work first requires the approach of a viewer. It is because so little can be achieved in scanning the room from a central location, the viewer is activated to approach. The headphones, which are wired to each work, further suggest an anticipated limitation of distance. When standing close to the screen under headphones, a viewer can properly enter each work.

Each video stands as an independent piece in the exhibition. They are not to be read as sequential in any way. The distance between each work, while enforcing a certain focussed attention with minimal peripheral distraction, also operates as a notable break from video to video. In this way, the viewer may begin at any one of the works and traverse across the gallery to view the work in whichever order they wish.

The gallery space itself operates as more than just a vessel for the seventeen works. It is a dark cavernous place with small light interruptions which fill the circumstance. This minimalism is evocative of the quiet stillness found in solemn places of worship, in sleepy houses in the suburbs, at twilight on the lake and in solitary drives with the radio turned off. The scale of the room collides with the scale of the screen. These small works are afforded a grand impact by virtue of the space around them.

The central position in which a viewer can scan the room is thus a culminating option. After recognizing, scrutinizing, discerning and being immersed in the work of each haiku video, the viewer will later constellate the screens as a larger meditation about looking and being. They can be read as portholes or long blinking glances into the wondrous everyday, here and now.

## **Conclusion**

In a time where technology continues to foster short attention span and high expectation for resolution and visual effect, art is left in a precarious predicament. This series of haiku videos accounts for this critical circumstance and invites the viewer to experience looking through a disciplined digital gaze. These video works are efficient in their delivery. They are lush in a contemporary aesthetic. Great care has been taken to ensure that they are appropriately crisp and succinct. More to the point however, this work slows viewing, invites re-viewing and operates as beginnings for the viewer to place themselves in. The haiku video is a vehicle to instigate 'wonder' as Chambers referred to it. Within its form is a primary perceptual experience, universal and personal at once, that is physically, emotionally and spiritually engaging.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Youngblood, Gene. "The New Canadian Cinema: Images From the Age of Paradox," *Artscanada* 27, no. 142-143 (April 1970): 7-12.

<sup>2</sup> Company, David. "Motion Pictures". *Frieze Magazine*. No 115. London UK. 2008

<sup>3</sup> Halworth, John. "Beyond Reason: Pre-Reflexive Thought and Creativity in Art". *Leonardo*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1997) MIT Press, p 137

<sup>4</sup> Halworth p.137

<sup>5</sup> Camper, Fred. "The Hart of London" *Jack Chambers' Absolute Film*. The Films of Jack Chambers. ed. Kathryn Elder. Cinematheque Ontario, 2002. p135.

<sup>6</sup> Chambers, Jack. "Perceptual Realism" *Jack Chambers' Absolute Film*. The Films of Jack Chambers. ed. Kathryn Elder. Cinematheque Ontario, 2002. p34.

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12

## Thesis Images



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