

Hypnagogia: Explorations of Sleep Paralysis

William Jerome Widenhouse V
The Department of Art and Art History
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Jackson Martin, Eric Tomberlin, Tamie Beldue

Abstract

For thousands of years, Sleep Paralysis has remained a largely inexplicable phenomenon both in the field of dream medicine and modern psychology. Victims often experience auditory, visual and tactile hallucinations along with sensations of suffocation claustrophobia and paranormal visitations. An analysis of the nightmarish imagery experienced by victims of Sleep Paralysis offers a unique window into our primal and repressed fear. as the subject is forced to confront them in an intimate setting. Fear comes from within, and since the victim's fear is a product of their imagination, they become simultaneously the cause and consequence of their own torment. *"Hypnagogia: Explorations of Sleep Paralysis"* is a photography series which explores this conflict between the rational mind and the irrational subconscious through depictions of the varied imagery and sensations which accompany a Sleep Paralysis episode. The photograph itself acts as a veil between the viewer and the dream reality depicted. Through the manipulation and degradation of film negatives, the photography is permeated by chaotic texture, emblematic of the tactile and visual hallucinations that occur during a sleep paralysis episode. By utilizing alternative experimental development processes, the series articulates these themes through metaphor, abstraction, and visual paradox combining influence from experimental 1970s photographers and expressionist painterly techniques of post-war surrealist painters.

1. Introduction

The images in *"Hypnagogia: Explorations of Sleep Paralysis"* explore the conflict between the rational mind and the irrational subconscious through artistic depictions of the phenomena which accompany Sleep Paralysis episodes. Sleep Paralysis can be one of the most surreal and terrifying experiences of a lifetime, as an individual awakens from a nightmare while their brain continues dreaming. Complete muscular paralysis causes the victim to be trapped within a waking nightmare. Feeling of suffocation and claustrophobia, are often accompanied by the sense of a malevolent entity present in the room. These experiences force the victim to confront their most primal fears in an intimate setting. Fear comes from within, and the horror experienced is a product of the victim's own imagination, making them both the architect and prisoner of their own waking nightmare. This duality of cause and consequence is the central thesis of this series. We have a remarkable ability to frighten ourselves, and there is nothing more frightening than the aspects which we keep hidden from ourselves.

I have experienced Sleep Paralysis since I was a child, and the phenomenon has had a profound influence on my development and sensibilities as an artist. This project has been an effort to examine my own relationship with the phenomenon and come to understand the implications regarding irrational fear and superstition. I hope that by investigating my own experiences through photography, I will come to unravel the mysticism surrounding the phenomenon. I have returned to these roots with the intention of reflection and self-inquiry in the tradition of Freudian surrealist painters of the 1930s. I have always been intrigued by the relationship between psychology and art, particularly in works which blend the multiple versions of reality.

Sleep Paralysis takes place during an overlap of the irrational dream state and rational sensory awareness. This collision is exemplified by the combination of abstract expressionistic techniques intersected with the photorealism. Scenarios depicted in this series reflect personal experiences, as well as testimonies from others who experience the phenomenon. The images feature concepts of self-inflicted horror and torment, by utilizing repetition of the figure in the role of victim and assailant. Surrealism is further enhanced by incorporating expressive textures which permeate the image. These marks are emblematic of the victim's emotional reality, including anxiety, vulnerability, claustrophobia and terror. By using alternative darkroom processes, the negatives have been warped, seared and mutilated to convey the tactile, emotional weight of a Sleep Paralysis episode. Each image is an artifact, a tangible object which encapsulates the trauma of a memory reflected in the methodology of the print. The image acts as a veil between the viewer and a dream reality. It is the landscape of the psychological, which is the setting for this series. Nothing exists outside of what is shown, and what is shown is unclear. Sleep paralysis acts as a springboard into the hypnagogic landscape, a nightmarish twilight zone where our rationality is at its most vulnerable.

2. Research

2.1 Qualities of Sleep Paralysis

Hypnagogia is the experience of the transitional threshold between wakefulness and sleep, specifically into R.E.M. (rapid eye movement) phase. R.E.M. phase is the deepest of six stages within a standard sleep cycle, and is the only phase in which we experience dreams. R.E.M. typically occurs about 90 minutes into the sleep cycle, but on occasion the sleeper experiences a sleep onset R.E.M., in which the brain transitions into the phase immediately. This transitional boundary can become the landscape of varied phenomena including sensations of flying or falling, auditory hallucinations of voices or mechanical sounds, or abstract visual hallucinations. This is a result of the brain receiving conflicting information from their physical sensation, and the onset of R.E.M. dream-state. All of these phenomena have surrealistic qualities, but none are as terrifying and all-consuming as Sleep Paralysis.¹

Sleep Paralysis is a symptom of REM Behavior Disorder, a psychobiological phenomenon which occurs when an individual's sleep cycle becomes desynchronized, and remains in REM sleep upon awakening. Desynchronization of the sleep cycle causes the subject to experience complete muscular paralysis. During this R.E.M. a chemical called glycine is released within the brain to block neurotransmitters and prevent a sleeping individual from acting out their dreams. It would not be inaccurate to state that all sleepers are experiencing Sleep Paralysis whenever they dream. A paralysis episode could be better described as *R.E.M. awareness*. If a sleeping subject becomes aware during R.E.M., glycine is still in circulation upon awakening, they become aware of their paralysis. This causes activity in the amygdala, a part of the brain designated to assessing danger. Normally the amygdala can confirm or disconfirm threats practically instantaneously, but while in R.E.M., it can do neither. This causes the subject's awareness to become hypervigilant to threats by analyzing sensory stimuli in extended apprehension. Another common symptom is the sensation of suffocation. In waking life, we are often unconscious of our breathing, but we can take control of it if we choose. During R.E.M breathing is controlled unconsciously by the brain, and failure in attempts to take control often lead to panic. Victims will often attempt to call for help but find themselves incapable. The anxiety operates like a closed feedback loop as the subject continues to panic from their loss of autonomy, and the still dreaming mind projects a context for their fear.

This can cause auditory and visual hallucinations, the most common being the sensation of a malevolent entity in the room with them. This figure is often undefined or ambiguous, and the prescience of any supernatural intruder at all is enough to evoke feelings of terror. The figure will often threaten the victim directly with mutilation, sexual intrusion or death, which is experienced audibly and visually. The form this intruder takes, interestingly, is entirely dependent on the culture or the belief system of the individual. Citizens in Newfoundland, often experience a witch or hag. The Chinese describe the phenomenon as *Qú yá chuāng*, ("to be oppressed by ghosts"), the Japanese call the experience *Kanashibari* (nocturnal spirit attack). In the middle ages Europeans believed the Paralysis was brought on by sexually obsessed daemons sent to torment or defile the sexually pure, while Mexicans use the phrase "Se me subió el muerto" ("a dead body climbed on top of me").²

In modern times, many western technological societies are not as inclined toward traditional folklore. Instead the intruder takes on a more culturally relevant appearance. Modern victims have reported being visited by characters from horror films, and Sleep Paralysis has been cited as a means which explains alien abduction accounts. Sleep Paralysis or even identities from the subjects own personal history. Research by Richard J. McNally and Susan A. Clancy in their essay *Sleep Paralysis in Adults Reporting Repressed, Recovered, or Continuous Memories of*

Childhood Sexual Abuse, insinuates that repressed trauma of sexual assault can be unpacked in a Sleep Paralysis episode, particularly when the victim is violated by the supernatural intruder or can identify the assailant as someone from their own past. People who suffer from past trauma are far more likely to suffer from sleep paralysis. There have been many studies which link Sleep Paralysis to panic disorder and anxiety.³

What is most interesting, is that the same core experience is defined by the victim's own culture and personal history, which is why the theme of self-torment is central to this series. In all cases the intruder regardless of form, appear to place the victim at the mercy of outside forces. In reality, the individual determines the what form the fear takes.²

2.2 Fuseli's *The Nightmare*

Sleep Paralysis has been represented in the visual arts for centuries, but none is as infamous as Henry Fuseli's 1781 painting *The Nightmare*. The painting is a descendant of the period of Romanticism, which focused on perception and the subjective qualities of the mind. In the painting, a sleeping woman visited by an Incubus, a malevolent spirit from Germanic folklore, which was believed to induce nightmares to virgin women and was representative of the male libido. The woman is rendered in brilliant pale values indicating purity. There is a particularly carnal, erotic sexual openness to her posture as she appears lifeless. On her chest sits Incubus whose expression is one of cold malevolence as it locks eye contact with the viewer. The incubus is thought to represent instincts, dream symbol of. In the corner is a dark horse whose expression can be described as nothing other than deranged. Art scholars consider the horse a visual pun on the term Nightmare. The etymology, of the term nightmare is derivative of the Scandinavian term *Mara*, that refers to an evil spirit which is sent to suffocate or torment sleepers.



Figure 1. Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas, 180 × 250 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts⁴
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-england/a/henry-fuseli-the-nightmare>

The Nightmare depicts a number of visual symbols which correlate to symptoms of a Sleep Paralysis episode. The woman's supine posture is indicative of a position of vulnerability as she is assaulted by demonic forces. Individuals who sleep on their back are much more likely to experience an episode. The Incubus and horse both represent

supernatural intruders, with Incubus specifically demonstrating a cold inhuman intellect often associated with the intruder archetype. The Incubus position on the woman's chest likely represents the sensations of suffocation and shortness of breath. Perhaps most significant is the Incubus's direct eye contact with the viewer. This is a powerful tool to have the demon confronting the viewer, making them an active participant in the scene. This is representative characteristic of Sleep Paralysis's relationship to fear as the victim forced to confront and accept the presence of the supernatural visitor.⁵

2.3 Personal Experience

I have been affected by sleep paralysis since I was very young. These experiences carry with them as much formative weight as other early memories, and I can remember them with intense clarity. I spent my formative years in a dark wood-paneled house, and at night the rooms had a cavernous foreboding aesthetic. In these earliest episodes, I would always be in the house alone. First would come a deep sense of dread. Part of me knew that just by my anticipation, my dread of confronting it, willed the visitor into existence, and just as the tension was the highest, the visitor would appear.

The visitor would always appear from far away, through doorways or down hallways. I would see the event happening as if in slow motion. The entrance was always accompanied by a rushing sound like being underwater. There would always be a sound like grinding machinery, and I would be frozen to the spot unable to move, unable to call for help. I always knew that if I moved my body at all the spell would be broken and I would be able to wake up, but it was like moving while being suffocated by a lead blanket. In this way, paralysis was always hypnopompic, or me the inability to wake up from a nightmare. For a child's developing sense of reality, these experiences were highly disturbing. I would fear going to sleep, and at times wonder if I was dreaming or awake. The phenomenon raised doubt as to my state of reality at any given point. This likely affected the development of my personality, as it caused me to be more introverted and contemplative. The repercussions of this condition are subtle, but have profoundly influenced my development, both as an individual and as an artist. This series is a comprehensive examination of these early experiences.

2.4 Benefits of Fear

Of all emotions fear is the most primal, a defense mechanism designed in the interest of self-preservation. There are five root fears: extinction, mutilation, loss of autonomy, social ostracization and ego death. In extreme circumstances fear triggers a fight or flight response within the individual. In the arena of Sleep paralysis, where neither of these are options, the subject is forced to experience this fear in a state of complete vulnerability. While all root fears are present in nightmares, when examining the fear surrounding Sleep Paralysis, extinction, mutilation, loss of autonomy are the most relevant.

Loss of autonomy is the most obvious, as Sleep Paralysis is the fundamental example of the root fear. Fear of loss of autonomy keeps us away from claustrophobic situations. During sleep paralysis, the subject is apart from the eyes, completely paralyzed, and at the mercy of whatever intruder they project. Fear of mutilation is in the interest in preserving the body. This is the root fear that we experience when weapons or dangerous animals, and even the revulsion we experience when looking at spoiled food. The body is a precious vessel we are instinctually programmed to protect. When the subject is paralyzed, they are helpless to protect their body. There are numerous accounts of sleep paralysis where the subject is the victim of bodily harm. The myth of alien abductions where the victim is taken on board an alien vessel and experimented upon is a manifestation of this primal fear. Extinction is the primary root fear, the preservation of one's life. The presence of a mysterious invader is often enough to trigger this fear, regardless of whether anything happens to them. Emotion is always amplified in dreams. In many cases of Sleep Paralysis victims believe they are going to die. Sleep Paralysis is a fairly undiscussed condition, and especially for particularly superstitious victims the experience can be one of the most terrifying in a lifetime.⁶

Fear is a primal response, but can also be a tool for self-reflection. As a Sleep Paralysis episode possess no actual threat (other than perhaps a psychological one), this arena can be used to explore what we are afraid of and why. These questions have a multitude of potential benefits when it comes to self-examination. Dreams have often been a tool for deciphering the nature of the subconscious, and the unique nature of a sleep Paralysis episode offers a unique foray into the nature of self-inflicted fear. The primary goal of this project is to serve as an investigation of this idea.

3. Methodology

3.1 Depicting the Unreal

The images in *Hypnagogia* take place in a dream reality which follows its own visual and narrative conventions. Each image in this series is a carefully constructed piece of tableau photography which contains a simple emotional narrative. I wanted the series to have a cinematic aesthetic encouraging me to distil each experience down to its emotional core. Each image could be a still from a film, but independently contains different subjects and approaches a separate concept. Each of these elements serve to complete a more comprehensive examination of the phenomenon. Particular qualities of sleep paralysis are revisited throughout, with the intent to broaden the scope of the series. Every image has a character, emotion and environmental clues that build a visual narrative. It was important to balance these components in order to preserve enough ambiguity to insight intrigue, while not discouraging the viewer by being too cryptic. For this reason, there is a great deal of thought and conceptual planning behind each image in the collection.

Hypnagogic states occur during the overlap of two distinct forms of consciousness: dream-state and rational consciousness. It is in the merging of realities that Sleep Paralysis takes place, and therefore I felt each element should have its own visual vocabulary in the series. This merging of real and surreal was accomplished by combining tableau photography with techniques found in expressionist painting. The rational would be exemplified by the photography, while the irrational would be expressed through alternative processing techniques on the film negative.

Photography deals in the objective. A photographer chooses the subject and viewpoint from which the photograph is taken, but otherwise artistic choices generally stop at that point. Reality is channeled through a machine, and the machine will record an unbiased document of reality. Whatever the camera records will be represented and generally the viewer will accept a photograph as a depiction of reality. Transversely, painting is a medium which by its nature, cannot depict an unbiased form of reality. Instead, a painting is the product of the artist channeling their *interpretation* of reality. The threshold for suspension of disbelief is broader for painting, and this subtle but profound difference allows surrealism to find its niche within the painting medium. I wanted a level of abstraction and suspension of disbelief found in painting, and in order to accomplish this I would have to remind the audience they are looking at an artifact.

The choice of 35-millimeter film was dictated by a desire to push the suspension of disbelief as far as possible within the photographic medium. Traditional film photography possesses an aesthetic which denotes an implied authenticity. Black and white takes this aesthetic choice a step further by distancing the viewer from the necessity of relating the depicted reality to their own. Because the human eye perceives reality in color, black and white reminds the viewer that they are seeing a recreation of reality. If an image depicting the surreal in photography is to be granted suspension of disbelief the viewer will be more invested in the reality depicted in the frame, rather than its relationship to their own world. The best way to encourage this would be to treat the image as a veil between the viewer and the dream reality.

Most people when they look at a photograph, understand it within the context of their own world. Although a photograph is a product of a separate time and place, it is assumed the world depicted operates under the same rules as our own. Jeff Wall describes this as looking *through* a photograph, rather than *at* a photograph. This is why for most people, when they see something clearly impossible taking place in photography, it is easy for them to dismiss the impossible, without ever engaging in any suspension of disbelief. This has become increasingly common in the postmodern age of digital photography, where the manipulation of photographs in computers has become a frequent practice. It was important to preserve as many reminders that the images take place on a film negative as possible. This means preserving film grain, dust and blemishes made to the negative. In some cases, even the sprocket holes remain in the final print. Ironically it is this stigma of authenticity that became the to exploit it. This branch of narrative photography is much akin to filmmaking in that it is the craft of illusion.⁷

3.2 Visualization

The variety of experiences possible during Sleep Paralysis lend themselves to differences in dynamics from one piece to another. It was important to establish a rhythm within the body of work, to promote an ebb and flow in drama. Sleep Paralysis can happen to anyone, and while the core experience is similar for most, each individual's perception will be different. In order to exemplify this, I used a variety of models in my tableaus of ranging age and ethnicity. This

illustrates that the experiences universally relatable, but references the deeply personal implications specific to the individual. These different types of experiences have different moods, and variety in alternative processing techniques was used to indicate different ranges of emotion. For example, the image *Staircase* (Figure 2) deals in the anticipation of an encounter, and the abstraction which represents this anxiety is left purposely subtle. The scratching only appears in the upper corners of the work, prickling out from the shadowed area. Conversely *Cannibal* (Figure 3) exhibits little subtlety in its manipulation, as the chaotic burn marks flowing from the subject's skull are representative of explosive waves of inescapable horror. These variations in emotion are represented visually by the choices made in expressive mark making.

Another crucial element in the photography was the maintaining a sense of isolation and claustrophobia to the imagery. This is achieved in part by the framing of the subject, and the approach to lighting. I purposely narrowed the aspect ratio of the images to give a sense of entrapment within the frame, and used a single light source to create a high contrast environment. The subject should feel exposed and singled out, and single source lighting was used to cultivate this effect. The entire series is shot indoors, allowing direct control over the amount of light within each image. Most figures reside in an ocean of blackness, populated by specific environmental elements necessary to develop the scenario. The darkness is a tool to invoke mystery, as the audience is shown only a fragmented moment in time, similarly they are only shown a fragment of a location. Some images take place directly in a nightmare, while others take place in the bedroom, but all have their figures experiencing an overlap of realities.



Figure 2. Rome Widenhouse. *Staircase*. 2017.
Photograph on Dibond. 35''x 24''

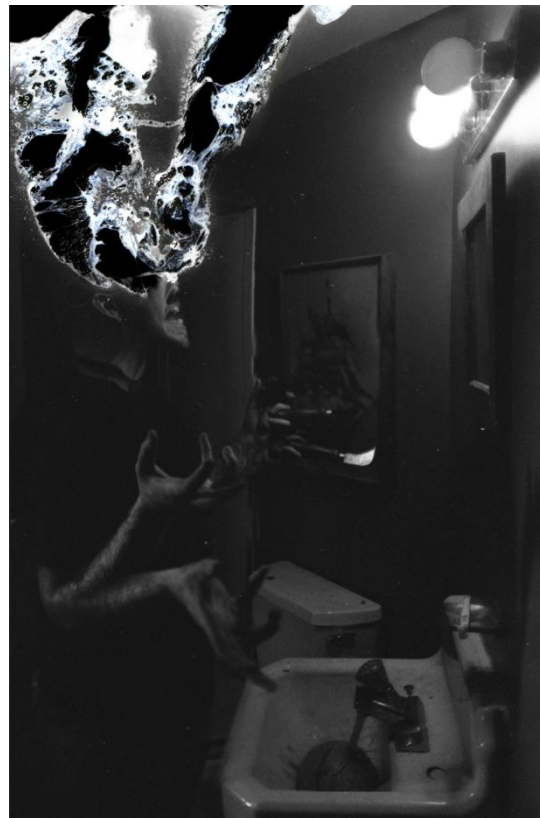


Figure 3. Rome Widenhouse. *Cannibal*. 2017.
Photograph on Dibond. 35''x 23''

3.3 Alternative Processes

Although I was working in photography, I wanted the series to resemble a surrealist painting exhibition. Almost all of the images are in a narrow, vertical orientation, which is more akin to the conventions of painting than photography. The importance of expressionist mark making is one of the central conventions to the language of the series. It was important to have a variety of means of distortion to give enough variety to the series, and infer differences in mood. I wanted the images to be steeped in rich atmosphere, and the best way to do that was saturating the images in texture. Expressive marks have a richness to their texture, and exemplify the emotion within the piece. In two-dimensional art,

the most obvious sensual stimulation is sight, but the second and most powerful tools is texture. Texture indicates the sensation of touch, and by extension the perception of sound as it is touched. Sleep paralysis is a very kinesthetic experience. The sensations of claustrophobia, pressure in the chest and adrenaline caused by panic, are all tactile. It was through textures that I could describe the atmosphere and mood of the dream reality by manipulating the negative with heat, scarification and chemistry.

Film photography possesses its own inherent texture in its film grain, but I wanted to take this a step further by roughing up the film negative itself. Incorporation of “alternative development processes” allow further means of abstraction in photography. Early in my phase of experimentation I found that different means of manipulating the negative served to lend themselves to different emotional states. Burn marks have a jarring explosive feel, as though the fabric of reality is being split open. This is used for the more climactic pieces which express the highest amplitude of terror. Scratching the negative possesses a sharp, prickly texture, which can represent anxiety, or the foreboding anticipation of danger. In extreme cases scratching can veil a subject and evoke feelings of suffocation. By scratching or distressing the negatives I am able to create expressive marks on the negative itself which add depth and richness to the image. These techniques are especially potent when they interact with the photographed image. By overlapping the abstracted marks within the image, a synthesis of realities is achieved. Since marks are made by hand, they possess an organic quality which would be extremely difficult to replicate in digital manipulation. I am able to construct an alternate reality in which the power of the dream takes over.



Figure 4. Rome Widenhouse. *The Screaming Chair*.
2017. Photograph on Dibond 35''x 21''

My image *The Screaming Chair* utilized a number of post processing techniques to integrate the alternative process within the photography. All marks are made to the film negative by hand to retain an imperfect, organic quality. The most apparent texture is the void where the subjects face should be. This was accomplished by burning away the celluloid with a soldering iron leaving an empty space. The marks around the hole turn a burnt orange brown. When translated to positive these marks become a blue-white bubbled texture which ring the black spaces. Black ink pen is used to make the white markings shooting off the left side of the burn mark. The ink sits on top of the plastic celluloid, and can be smeared by hand to leaving a fiery texture implying motion blur. These pen marks and twist up and intertwine with ductwork on the upper right side of the image. The layering is achieved through compositing particular

elements (in this case the duct work) from an unmanipulated version of the image on top of the manipulated version in photo editing software. Alternative process techniques integrated with the environment in the photograph is one way to synthesize the image a cohesive work.

3.4 Construction

The conception of each image begins with meticulous planning. Ideas either come from an attribute of Sleep Paralysis, or a specific image from my own experience. In either case the image begins as a rough sketch. It is in this phase which setting, subject matter and lighting are taken into account as well as the number of images necessary to archive the desired result. *The Screaming Chair* is a composite of 3 separate images: 2 with the subject in the chair, (one of which is mirrored allowing the burns to appear as though they are interlocked), and another of an empty chair which was not manipulated. This third image allowed for the ductwork to overlap the white markings.

The photography phase consists of a series of shots on 35mm film with the subject in a variation of poses, as well as a frame without the subject. This allows greater flexibility in the post production process. Since the camera has not moved, and the lighting has not changed the images blend together seamlessly as they are composited together. Once the negatives have been developed, they are scanned into the computer before any alterations are made to the negative. This way a clean version is available in case any mistakes are made during the negative manipulation process.

A variety of techniques are employed in the alternative processing of the negative. The negatives are scratched, scraped, burned melted stretched or chemically treated to produce a variety of chaotic organic markings. Every mark is permanent, and information is destroyed in this process. This forces me to strategically consider the marks made, and how they will develop. Although each image is based off a sketch the messy and improvisational nature of the manipulation process always lends its own creative opportunities. The lack of control always has an element of surprise to the composition.



Figure 5. Rome Widenhouse. *Void*. 2017. 35mm Negative

Once a negative is manipulated it is re-scanned into the computer before further changes are made. This process can be repeated a number of times, but is not always necessary. Negatives are occasionally re-scanned as many as five

times, each with progressing levels of alteration. However, in most circumstances there are only two; the original and the manipulated version. This is usually enough to complete an image. This is a long and arduous process, particularly due to my need to scan the negatives at the highest possible resolution. This is necessary to print an image that was originally 35mm at 35 inches (nearly 25 times its original size)

This allows opportunity for reflection to better examine my technique with the manipulation tools. Although the negatives are black and white they are scanned in full color. Some forms of manipulation such as burns, discolor the celluloid a reddish brown around the mark. On the negative, this appears a cold blue and is often left in the final image.

After the manipulation process, the scans are compiled into photo editing software as individual layers. Not every scan is used in the composite. Depending on the composition, anywhere between two and eight layers are used in the final version. The layers are then composited together using masking functions in the software to blend together the marked versions and the original image. This is the stage in which the image takes its final form. Until this stage there is a level of uncertainty as to the final form of the image. Often projects are kept open as several images are edited simultaneously. Working at a gradual pace actually expedites the process by breaking up the monotony of overworking an image, allowing fresh perspectives, and keeps allowing more engagement with the work. I will usually work on images over a series of weeks. When returning to work on older images new ways to improve them become apparent.

4. Influences

4.1 Francis Bacon

The impact of Francis Bacon's paintings on the style, ambiguity and aesthetics of this series cannot be overlooked. Bacon's grotesque and brutally raw imagery has been a staple of surreal painting since the 1940's. Bacon's body of work explores an emotional reality of the human condition through his abstract rendering of forms. These works utilize conventions of portraiture to do reimagine and defy them. His figures are often so distorted that they are stripped of their identity, serving as symbols of their psychological condition. This aspect was one I intended to replicate within this series by preserving the anonymity of the subject to better present their emotional state.

Bacon's expressive brushwork is emulated in my alternative processing. Scratching and burning the negative to obscure and the figure and distance my work from conventional photography. Environments are left purposely ambiguous to provide a lack of stability to the composition. The reality depicted does not correlate with the one we are familiar. Often, they are only flat geometric shapes which juxtapose the organic fleshy rendering of the figures.



Figure 6. Francis Bacon. 1946. 1946.
Oil and pastel on linen. 197.8 x 132.1 cm. MOMA.⁸
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79204>



Figure 7. Rome Widenhouse. *Invader*. 2017.
Photograph on Dibond 35" x 24"

Bacon's Painting 1946 demonstrates an ambiguity of figure and environment in its contradictions to perspective and general lack of resolution. Bacon strategy considers what to show and what to keep ambiguous, but provides enough contextual details to the composition to foster intrigue and meaning. The imperfections to the rendering of objects have incredible texture and provide an incomplete interpretation of the subject. These traits were carried over to the composition of my images particularly in regard to ambiguity of the environment and the anonymity of the subject.

4.2 Sally Mann

During my research for this project I fell in developed a tremendous adoration with Sally Mann's photography, particularly in her series "*Battle grounds*", "*Deep South*" and "*Proud Flesh*". Mann works primarily in collodion wet plate photography, a process which lends itself do gorgeous abstractions and distortions within the printed image. If possible I would have photographed this series in collodion prints, but the technique was beyond my means at the time. Sally Mann is a master of creating a of mystery in intrigue in her work through subtly in composition and lighting. Her use of collodion wet plate techniques permeates her images with ethereal, painterly aesthetics. Her series *Proud Flesh* possess a reverence for the interplay of light and shadow around the human form.



Figure 8. Sally Mann. "*Hephaestus*." 2008.
Gelatin Silver Print. 38.1 x 34.3 cm⁹
<http://sallymann.com/selected-works/proud-flesh>



Figure 9. Rome Widenhouse. *Purge*. 2017.
Photograph on Dibond. 25''x 9''

The abstract markings in many of her wet plate prints served as inspiration for how to employ alternative processing in my own work. Mann uses alternative processing to add context of the image. The markings an imperfection to these prints serve to strengthen the sense of ephemeral beauty and decay. The execution of these techniques in the image *Hephaestus* do not distract from the subject matter, but add another layer which serves to subtly focus the concept behind the work. The most effective photography offers a dialogue beyond what is shown in the frame. In my series, I wanted to depict sensations which were intangible, and alternative processing offered a means of evoking abstract concepts in the work.

5. Conclusion

This project has been very helpful in the development of my technical growth as a photographer. While I had experimented with alternative photography processes and digital composites before, I am proud that the processes of creating these images was one that is uniquely my own. I majored in photography because of my appreciation for filmmaking, and the way that pictures can tell stories. I intend to peruse this passion in independent filmmaking after graduation, and this project has honed my capacities as a visual storyteller. While shooting in tableau I was required to make my own lighting choices, and direct my subject for the optimal result.

The visual language of the project evolved as well. When I began the most important component was visualizing my concept. I wanted to build narrative within a frame while offering enough ambiguity to keep it intriguing. I think I was able to accomplish this. Certain works are more ambiguous than others, but the more discernable works are the more shocking. This series represents a number of concepts and Ideas. The most central, the idea that the subject is the cause and consequence of their own fear, is evident in every one of these tableaux.

A short while into the production of the series it became clear that it was important to preserve an anonymity of the figures. The idea is that although the nature of the experience is specific to the individual, Sleep Paralysis can happen to anyone. therefore, it was important that the viewer not be caught up on who the subject is, but rather what they are experiencing. This dissociation was very constructive to the series. Necessity to obscure the face of the subject granted the opportunity to experiment with different expressionist methods, in turn lending themselves to different types of experiences.

Another direction had to do with the perspective of the photograph. Most of the images have a third person perspective; the audience is observing the event, but not interacting. Over the course of the project I decided to change the viewpoint to the perspective of the person undergoing the experience. In “Invader” the figure is directly engaged with the viewer. This is based on an experience of mine, and although the piece lacks the subtlety of some of the other pieces, it is effective because of this confrontational nature.

When photographing this series, I was working in very low light conditions. Light is the medium for photography; without light there is no image, and out of a shoot with the correct exposure was challenging. The best way to counteract this was to shoot in aperture priority mode, which will automatically balance the shutter speed length to ensure correct exposure. However, this feature sometimes required the aperture to be open for as many as 10 seconds (shutter speed for crisp imagery is usually less than half a second), and if the subject moved at all during this time it would result in a blurred image. The result is a ghostlike effect which was appropriate in the context of the project. For certain images, I purposely directed the model moving during long exposure, and at times would even tilt the camera while the shutter was open to achieve the desired effect. When these layers were composited together with other sharper images the result was ethereal and another tool to illustrate another kind of emotional dynamic.



Figure 10. Rome Widenhouse. *Astral Body*.2017. Photograph on Dibond 35''x 25''

Although digital software was used in the assembly of the image, it was crucial that all forms of abstraction be done by hand. This breathes life into the image and the textures have an organic, chaotic quality which would be impossible to replicate by using a computer. The process of manipulating the negative was by far the most enjoyable step in the creation of the image, and always retained a sense of spontaneity to the creation process. Film photography possesses an inherent delayed satisfaction and reward cycle, and this process was taken a step further in the alternative processing. Photographs did not always turn out as planned, and alterations to the negative were always a gamble as information of the original negative was being destroyed. It was impossible to tell exactly how the image would turn out when shooting, and there was always a necessity for utilitarianism and creative problem solving with the project.

Sleep Paralysis has been an issue for me since childhood, and as the subject for this project, the most important element was for me to better understand my own relationship with the phenomenon, and by extension my own belief systems and irrational fears. Over the course of the year I had only a few minor Sleep Paralysis episodes, and my attitude toward them had changed. While before I would fear the experience, even fear going to bed, this is no longer the case. Over last two month I have three episodes, and they were more intriguing than frightening. At times, I even wanted to remain in the episode to examine what was going on. This was in part due to my hunger for ideas for this project, collecting new experiences, but the experience of Sleep paralysis has been de-mystified for me. I can now tell when I am entering an episode, am aware of my limitations, and curious about the images I am confronted with. Understanding something which you fear, strips away its power until it can be used as a tool that you control. Now I am only left a reverence of the phenomenon as I hope this series can do as much to demystify Sleep Paralysis, as it does celebrate it.

6. References

1 Stefani, A., A. Iranzo, J. Santamaria, and B. Högl. "Description of sleep paralysis in The Brothers Karamazov by Dostoevsky." *Sleep Medicine*, December 22, 2016. Accessed February 04, 2017. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2016.12.022>.

2 French, Chris. "Something Wicked This Way Comes: Causes and Interpretations of Sleep Paralysis." Lecture, University of London, London, November 10, 2009. November 10, 2009. Accessed August 2, 2011. <https://vimeo.com/11459308>.

3 McNally, Richard J., and Susan A. Clancy. "Sleep paralysis in adults reporting repressed, recovered, or continuous memories of childhood sexual abuse." *Anxiety Disorders*, May 26, 2004. Accessed February 5, 2017. Elsevier.

4 Figure 1. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-england/a/henry-fuseli-the-nightmare>

5 Cheyne, J. A., Steve D. Ruffer, and Ian R. Newby-Clark. "Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic Hallucinations during Sleep Paralysis: Neurological and Cultural Construction of the Night-Mare." *Consciousness and Cognition* 8, no. 3 (September 1999): 319-37. Accessed April 23, 2017. Elsevier. Keyword: Sleep Paralysis.

6 Haskell, Robert E. "Cognitive Psychology and Dream Research: Historical, Conceptual, and Epistemological Considerations." *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*,, SPECIAL ISSUE: COGNITION AND DREAM RESEARCH, 7, no. 2/3 (Summer 1986). Accessed February 6, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43853212>.

7 "Pictures Like Poems." Interview by Marc C. Wagner. Huffington Post. April 8, 2015. Accessed February 23, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/louisiana-channel/jeff-wall-pictures-like-p_b_7117110.html.

8 Figure 6. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79204>

9 Figure 8. <http://sallymann.com/selected-works/proud-flesh>