

Critical Review of Practice

Introduction

Threshold is a photographic project that traces the subjective contours of my childhood memories and seeks to impart to my audience the deeply held emotions that surface whenever I journey back to the old villages from Dobrogea, a south-eastern region of Romania. I explore the landscapes surrounding these villages by foregrounding my intimate and sometime abstract childhood memories. In the words of Gilli: “the environments are always landscapes of the mind... Places contain us as a material and psychological skin at the same time”. (Gilli, 2015)

Threshold is not meant to serve as an arch of entering and leaving a geographical lived space that endured through history and time, but rather as a passing bridge between memory and imagination, between reality and fantasy.

Although my childhood memory might be vague, it remains “a member of the immense network of the world” (Barthes, 1981). The memory of temporality and belonging that I attempt to reflect in *Threshold* is similar to Roland Barthes’ work in *Camera Lucida*.

The intentional act of photographer is mired in his own past, confronted, and held captive by something that irrevocably was. This would be the “mnemic punctum”, the bothersome detail of a memory that refuses to join the continuum of consciousness of the past, present and future.

This report provides a critical evaluation of my practice, by referring to other photographers and visual practices that have informed its making, development and intended consumption. The following sections will discuss the visual and technical choices made, some reflections on contextualization as well as on post-production and publishing linked to my practice.

Visual and technical choices

My intent as a photographer is to awaken in the viewer the childhood memory that lies within all of us, even if the contents of the memory itself is not the same.

Therefore, the visual and technical choices that define my practice aim to spur an emotional response from viewers through contrasts and interplay between fantasy and reality.

This aesthetic is further enhanced by the desaturated and muted tones, the sharpness used to highlight the land texture, natural light, and the overall composition balance.

The image that opens the photographic series in this project (Fig.1) is the one that best illustrates the aesthetic and techniques used in my practice. It depicts children playing atop and beneath arid and

harsh land, their colored clothing contrasting against the grey and nearly dead landscape.

In here, there are several different types of symbolic threshold: the boundary between cloudy sky and earth, the positioning of the children, hidden or visible, and the blur between reality and fantasy.

“It revolves around natural landscapes, represented by suggestive images possessing a peculiar symbolic poignancy.” (Sozzani, 2007).

The sky above the children is grey and cloudy, unsettled. In contrast, the earth is resolute, sharply veering down at its edge, where it creates natural alcoves for the children to play in. It evokes a sense of balance between what is ephemeral and what shall remain after playtime is over.

Sugimoto’s Pacific Ocean (Fig. 2) inspires in me the unstoppable force of nature – sky and water, untouchable and yet terrifyingly close and powerful, the only difference between them lying in the contrasting line of the horizon.

This feeling of helplessness in the face of the elements is what I as photographer attempted to recreate to frame a compelling story that is driven by children that seem not to care of the rigidity that lies around them.



Fig. 1 : Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold*.



Fig. 2 : Hiroshi Sugimoto. 1985. *Pacific Ocean*.

Another contrast that I want to evoke in my practice is the one between fantasy and reality. The children seem undaunted, and relentlessly ignore the barren landscape to manifest the inner state of play.

The intimate relationships between bodies, landscape and environment were imprinted in my memory by one of the frames from Ingmar Bergman's historical fantasy film 'The Seventh Seal' (Fig. 3).

This scene also inspired me in possible allegorical representations of the landscapes that use forms of virtues or vices, and of other ethical or social meanings.

I deliberately chose not to go down this route as the scene represented in my photos is about the children's innocent ignorance on what the future may hold.

I am more informed by Henri Cartier Bresson's candid photography (Fig 4) that combines documentary-style intimacy with poetic dynamism, giving a sense of surrealism to the images.

"The frame cuts into space and the shutter cuts into time, turning the photographic act into an event in itself." (Company, 2008)

In addition to the artists mentioned above, my work is constantly being informed by artists from different genres of visual arts, like Bieke Depoorter, Todd Hido, Rehab Eldalil, Carolyn Drake, Ainhoa Rodriguez, to name a few.



Fig. 3 : Ingmar Bergman.1957. *The Seventh Seal*.



Fig. 4 : Cartier Bresson.1933. *Seville*.

In this respect, *THE LINE*, the collaborative work of Bieke Depoorter and Gideon Jacobs, explores the phenomena of boundaries and the way humans consciously and unconsciously map their lives with limits (Fig 5, 6).

“The project, in blurring the line between the real and imagined, creates a surreal experience that asks the audience to reflect on their own lines, the ones they have drawn or found, the ones they know or have yet to discover.” (Depoorter, 2021)

In my practice I’ve focused on blurring the line between the real and unreal, what is recognizable and what isn’t, creating a sense of mystery of surrealism, longing, and memory (Fig 7, 8).

Todd Hido is one of the artists that influenced me the most in regards to creating images that evoke an unsettling feeling that resonates with his own history, but also resonates with many other people, even while the narrative remains limited. His photos feel still, quiet, and represent echoes of what was before. I am attracted to Hido’s use of textural detail and color, and variations in light and shadow to create unsettling scenes.

“In all my pictures of people or places I see something of myself. I see the same qualities or troubles that I faced growing up. The root of my work comes from the aberrations of my childhood and how these become attractions in adulthood. It is about an attempt to understand how we replay and recreate our earlier lives over and over again. To me it all fits into me going back and responding to my history. My memory.” (Hido, 2007)



Fig. 5, 6 : Bieke Depoorter. 2021. *THE LINE*.



Fig. 7, 8 : Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold*.



Fig. 9 : Todd Hido. 2003. *Fragments of Memories*.

In addition, I am very inspired by the way Rehab Eldalil creates tension by bringing in the forefront the land texture to her images.

Her project *Longing of the Stranger Whose Path Has Been Broken* focuses on the connections between people and land which the photographer believes defines the notion of belonging.



Fig. 10, 12 : Rehab Eldalil. 2018. *The Longing of the Stranger Whose Path Has Been Broken*.

My work was similarly inspired by Carolyn Drake's project *Two Rivers* which represents her journey along the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers, bringing to attention the economic activity which robbed the region of water and life, leaving the land between the two rivers parched and covered with dust.

Further on, I resonate with aesthetic and messages used by Ainhua Rodriguez in her movie *Destello Bravio*. The movie is filled with dark landscapes creating a feeling of suspension.

In a similar manner I also use desaturated colors and used natural light, creating the same sense of tension that brings forward the base emotional response from viewers (Fig 17, 19).

Rodriguez says that she draws from reality because it's the best material available – a “treasure. The whole film has a dual environment”, and so does my *Threshold*.

“You have the documentary part [...] On the other hand, you have the magical realism, surrealism and suspense. Those both worlds are present in the image [...]” (Rodriguez, 2021)



Fig. 13 : Carolyn Drake. 2009. *Two Rivers*.



Fig. 14 : Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold*.



Fig. 15, 16 : Ainhoa Rodriguez. 2021. *Destello Bravio*.



Fig. 17, 19: Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold*.

Like many other photographers I am also interested in constructing my own visual reality in my images. The construction could vary from a lightly directed image for a more precise composition, to more complex ones that involve manipulation and assemblage of several images to better express a point of view. For example, Fig. 20 is a staged picture, wherein the girl and I worked together to construct the image.

The girl had picked the flowers as a gift for me, and we repurposed them to decorate her hair with. Whereas in most of my photos I act more as a hunter, capturing images as they organically happened, in this one I preferred to construct the image to bring some sense of fantasy to the harsh reality of the landscape.

Julie Blackmon's work acts as my inspiration in regards to the narrative choices and unsettling mood – like the use of negative space, performance, and positioning (Fig. 21 ,23).

“While her works possess the spontaneity of random snapshots, Blackmon judiciously choreographs each shoot, with some input from her subjects; it's this combination of the real and the artificial that keeps us looking again and again.” (Kirsch, 2020)



Fig. 20 : Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold*.



Fig. 21 : Julie Blackmon.2009. *Line Up.*



Fig. 22 : Julie Blackmon.2022. *Float Boat.*



Fig. 23 : Julie Blackmon.2009. *Loading Zone.*



Fig. 24, 25: Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold.*

To the other end, I experimented with image manipulation and collaging to convey new meanings, like for example in Fig 26.

To emphasize the organic connection between the land and the people, I used different visual methods to express how the environment leaves its mark on the subjects' being. The absence of the accents of color eliminates any sense of playfulness.

The rocks that fill in the silhouettes make the contrast disappear and the characters become one with their environment.

Superimposing the soil texture on the children's silhouettes was my final choice as the newly created image best conveys the intended message of stillness and impossibility to escape.

Artists all informed by our history, experiences, and education. I reflected on other photographers' work that used similar approaches, such as Eileen Agar and Felicia Simion, but with completely different results than mine (fig 27 and 28).

In both instances, the subject was replaced by either rocks or flowers. In Fig. 28, however, the result disenfranchises the subject, and in Fig. 27, the subject was given a precious quality.

"I like to take the reality of one world and use it as a springboard for the imagination". (Soth, 2015)



Fig. 26 : Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold*.

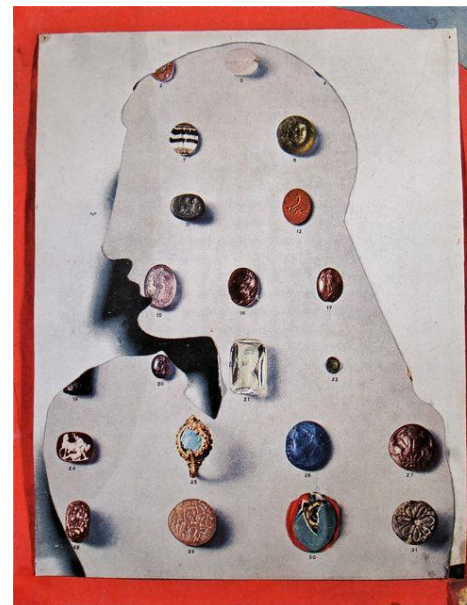


Fig. 27 : Eileen Agar. 1936. *Precious Stones*.



Fig. 28 : Felicia Simion. 2023. *Nature*.

Intertextualization

Using the concept of inter-textualization I looked into my work and others to reflect on how iconic photographs were transformed either as a conscious or unconscious artistic process.

Linked to my own work, I realized that Diane Arbus' *Identical Twins*, that has been further reinterpreted by various artists including Stanley Kubrick and Julie Blackmon, might have inspired me to recreate what she referred to as "differentness in identicalness". Fig. 29 shows two sisters, dressed similarly, posing. However, in all its denial, the 'differences' in parallelism and uniformity exhibited in the photo slowly and unavoidably send an unsettling message to the viewer's mind.

"There are, and have been, and will be an infinite number of things on Earth: Individuals all different, all wanting different things, all knowing different things, all loving different things, all looking different... That is what I love: the differentness". (Arbus, 1939)

A similar "differentness and otherness" transpires from my photo (Fig. 32) too.

This is not a staged photo. Rather, it depicts an authentic scene I encountered during the making of *Threshold*. The girls are photographed head-on, and the viewer's eye is automatically attracted to them, rather than to the landscape. The image conveys the same unsettling mood to the viewer.



Fig. 29 : Diane Arbus. 1967.
Identical Twins. Roselle, New Jersey.



Fig. 30 : Stanley Kubrick. 1980.
The Shinning.



Fig. 31 : Julie Blackmon. 2020. *New Neighbors* .



Fig. 32 : Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold* .

Post-production and publishing

Post-production is an important stage in my practice. Although many decisions are made during the production, when I select the camera and framing, the angle, and the shutter speed, or when I select the moment of the day when the light hits just right, I also devote time to organize and select the photos that have the highest potential to undergo post-production.

The most important criterion in post-production is ensuring that the narrative is consistent throughout the selection, eventually by correcting the colors.

The aesthetic that defines *Threshold* is enhanced by the desaturated and muted tones for better conveying the unsettling feel, the land texture with its harshness, the natural light and frontal frames, and balance.

I exemplify below these considerations with two images that were excluded from the selection (Fig 33, 34), either because the light changed the unsettling mood that I wanted to convey to a more romantic one or they were too crowded with information and the aridness of the environment was somehow left behind.

I chose to do a dummy book for the presentation and dissemination of my work so that the audience has an intimate view of my photographs. The gate pages enforce the sense of intimacy and revealing. I was inspired in this process by various

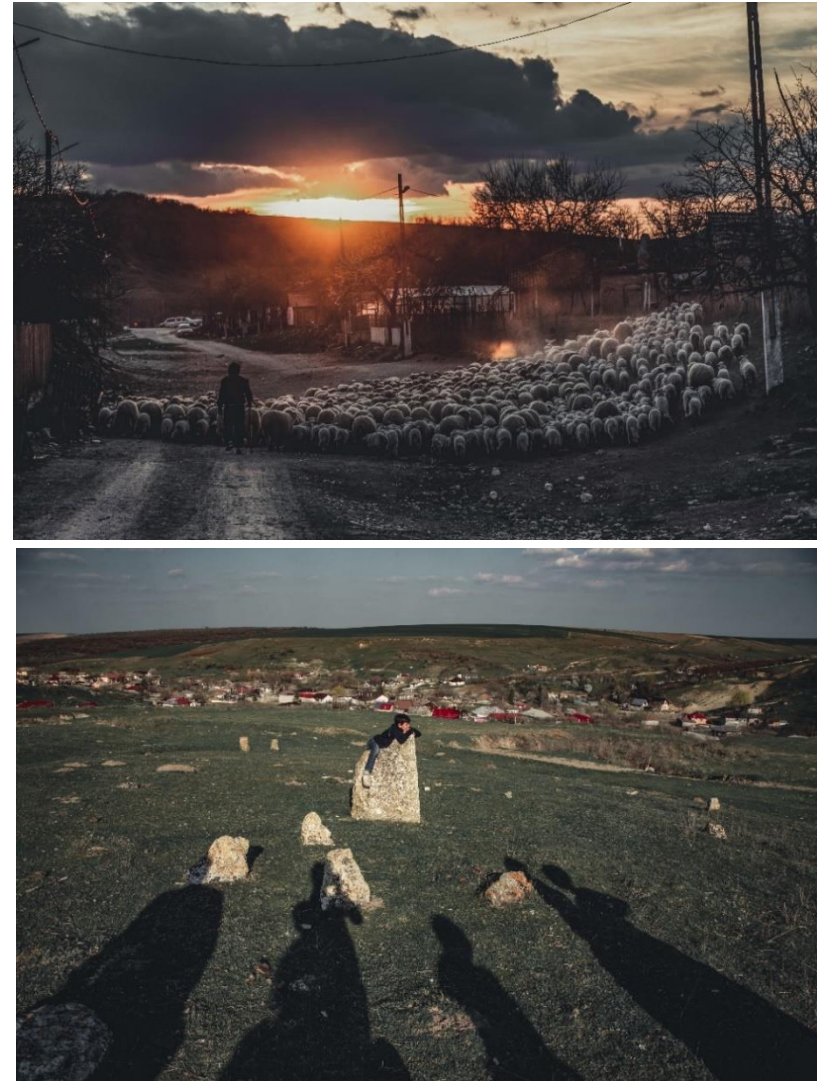


Fig. 33, 34 : Iris Maria Tusa. 2023. *Threshold*.

artists that used the concept of folding pages, one of them being Carolyn Drake in her book *Two Rivers*. (Fig. 35) I chose to print on spreadsheet (Fig. 36) the traces of the earth's texture in order to enforce the idea of the land's harshness and the children's bond to it.

"I feel like the books we make are greatly benefited by me having this long, slow, solo experience of deciding what's in and what's out, and most importantly, the sequence those images end up in." (Hido, 2015)

In lieu of conclusions

An artist does not exist in a vacuum, and I am no exception. We are all informed by our history, experiences, and education. The challenge is, however, to contextualize our work and be clear in our intentions. However, "the photograph is a message. Considered overall this message is formed by a source of emission, a channel of transmission and a point of reception." (Barthes, 1997).

My intent as a photographer is to awaken in the viewer the childhood memory that lies within all of us, even if the contents of the memory itself is not the same. The visual and technical choices that define my practice aim to spur an emotional response from viewers through contrasts and interplay between fantasy and reality by using desaturated and muted tones, natural light and overall compositional balance. The same aesthetic is observed during post-production to ensure the consistency of the narrative throughout the selection of the images for publication.

My creative process is an integral part of the internal context of every photo. As presented in the report, my visual and technical choices are constantly being informed by artists from different genres of visual arts. Whether I fully comprehend their creative process and the internalized contexts or I only judge the final work at face value (the difference between "looking into the photo" as opposed to "looking at the photo", other artists' work definitely make an impact into my approach. The channels of transmission and the points of reception of my photographs are, however, less controllable. Therefore, my finishing statement is rather the point to the review, and the moral of the story - I need to continue trusting my vision and instincts, but also to devote time to reflect on other artists' work and invest time to wait for the shot that best tells my story.



Fig. 35 : Carolyn Drake. 2009. *Two Rivers*.



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