RETURNING TO THE LIGHT

By

CHARLIE CUMMINGS

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

PROF. LINDA ARBUCKLE, CHAIR
PROF. ANNA CALLUORI HOLCOMBE, MEMBER
PROF. ROBERT MUELLER, MEMBER

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Every region has places that capture the hearts and imaginations of people who are familiar with them. These places cultivate a connection to place through the experience of visiting them and experiencing a sense of the awe and wonder. In central Florida, the freshwater springs allow people to escape from the mundane experience of life and to experience the sublime in nature. The memories of these experiences define our relationship to the springs. Memorabilia, artifacts, and photographs from the experience serve as tokens that allow us to revisit the original moment that inspired the cherished memories.

Returning to the Light is an intermedia installation exploring the interplay of imagery and form as a representation of the relationship between connection to place through experience and the urge to try to recreate or recapture a glimpse of the sublime. The installation consists of two artworks. The first, Prismatic, incorporates ceramic monoprints of images of defining moments from visits to the springs, kiln-cast glass objects that replicate swimming equipment, and projected video that relates to the photographic images in the monoprints. The video illuminates and enlivens the group of prints and glass articles. The individual prints each hold a portion of the light from the video and when viewed from a distance begin to coalesce and give a sense of the intangible and ephemeral qualities that make the springs a cherished destination.
The second artwork, *Shimmer*, consists of ceramic replicas of inner tubes used to float on the water of the springs and projected video of light effects on and in the water. The ripples and bubbles projected on the top of the inner tubes momentarily animate their surface and inspire recollection of the fugitive sense of experiencing the springs on the tubes.

We set out to have an experience in nature as an escape from everyday life. The objects and images we collect become effigies that carry and invoke the memories of that experience. *Returning to the Light* is my attempt to share my memories of trips to the springs in a way that will inspire the awe and wonder I felt in the viewers of my installation.
Introduction

Every region has places that capture the hearts and imaginations of people who are familiar with them. These places cultivate a connection to place through the experience of visiting them and experiencing a sense of the awe and wonder. In central Florida, the freshwater springs allow people to take time away from everyday life to reconnect with nature. The memories of these experiences define our relationship to the springs. Memorabilia, artifacts, and photographs from the experience serve as tokens that allow us to revisit, in memory, the original events that inspired the cherished memories.

Taking a Vacation

It is a part of human nature to seek comfort and familiarity in place and routine. At the same time I am also afflicted by wanderlust, a sense that there may be something better or more exciting waiting to be found around the next bend. This allure of the unknown gives me a sense that I need to escape from the mundane urban life I live to find something exotic. I take a vacation to visit nature in search of a different experience. This escape may be a return to a special familiar place or to unexplored country.

Connection to Place

During my travels I notice nuances in the land and scenery that will become milestones in my memory of the trip and will be associated with experiences at the final destination. The location where I encounter the sublime in nature becomes familiar through my adventure, and memories of that experience become a touchstone for the way I felt during that discovery. I develop affection for places where special things happen. In her book A Field Guide to Getting Lost, Rebecca Solnit writes “Perhaps it’s that you can’t go back in time, but you can return to the scenes of a love, of a crime, of happiness,
and of a fatal decision; the places are what remain, are what you can possess, are what is immortal.” (Solnit 117) Taking that thought a bit further, photographs, postcards, videos, and objects collected during the experience are memorabilia of the encounter and allow a return to the ephemeral event through their connection to the scene of the event.

**Place in Memory**

Upon returning from the vacation adventure, I am reminded there is no place like home. At the same time, I also idealize the place I visited in remembering the adventure. It is the contrast between home and an unfamiliar locale that makes both special. Back in normal life, souvenirs becomes a modern wunderkammer, or collection of wonders, through which I can conjure glimpses of the feelings of awe, wonder, and escape felt during the excursion. Sharing these keepsakes with others can also invoke in them a resonant sense of the experience that led to my connection to the location, and reminds them or their own such places and events.

**Connection to Nature in Historic Art**

Ansel Adams’ photographs of the American West and Yosemite National Park have roused a sense of wonder and sentimentality for his subjects in viewers around the world. His sense of awe toward Marion Lake comes through in a 1925 letter to his future wife, Virginia Best:

“This Lake is the most beautiful I have ever seen: it cannot be described. The several days we shall pass here will be a fitting climax to a wonderful trip. It is my hope that my pictures will give a little of the beauty and atmosphere of this delightful place...” (Adams 24)

Looking at his photograph of the lake, it is easy to vicariously understand his appreciation, and want to go there to experience the panorama in person. Adams’ love for the grandeur of his subject matter
compelled him to repeatedly leave everything behind to journey to these wonderful places. His photographs are artifacts that document and evoke his experiences.

The paintings of the Hudson River School artists document a time when large portions of the Hudson River Valley were relatively untouched by man. These painters demonstrate a strong sense of personal connection to the landscape they depict. They offer a romanticized view of the landscape they experienced in person.

“While the elements of the paintings are rendered very realistically, many of the actual scenes are the synthesized compositions of multiple scenes or natural images observed by the artists. In gathering the visual data for their paintings, the artists would travel to rather extraordinary and extreme environments, the likes of which would not permit the act of painting. During these expeditions, sketches and memories would be recorded and the paintings would be rendered later, upon the artists' safe return home.” (Wikipedia, Hudson River School)

Jasper Francis Cropsey's Sunset after a Storm in the Catskill Mountains gives the viewer an idealized image of the wild majestic beauty of Catskill Mountains. In this painting, Cropsey depicts a fleeting moment after a storm when the landscape is bathed in warm radiance by the setting sun. The artist was probably attracted to the location because of its natural beauty and compelled to document the ephemeral beauty he witnessed there. Cropsey's conviction that this scene transcends the everyday is infectious. The viewer can both feel a yearning to see this vista in person and can also understand how the painting was a touchstone for the actual
experience of being there.

The Florida Springs

Explorer and naturalist William Bartram gives an early account of the wonder of the springs of Florida in his book *Travels* published in 1791. Describing the boil of a spring near Lake George, he wrote:

“About twenty yards from the upper edge of the basin (sic), and directly opposite to the mouth or outlet to the creek, is a continual and amazing ebullition, where the waters are thrown up in such abundance and amazing force, as to jet and swell up two or three feet above the common surface: white sand and small particles of shells are thrown up with the waters, near to the top, when they diverge from the center, subside with the expanding flood, and gently sink again, forming a large rim or funnel round about the aperture or mouth of the fountain, which is a vast perforation through a bed of rocks, the ragged points of which are projected out on every side. Thus far I know to be matter of real fact, and I have related it as near as I could conceive or express myself”. (Bartram 165-166)

He continues by describing the plethora of aquatic life and the ethereal quality of the water in the springs. Though the spring boil has diminished due to many factors including the influence of man, even now over two hundred years later, Floridian springs still offer visitors a chance to experience the sublime. The crystal waters create a lens that, from above, flattens the great depths below the surface to create the illusion that the fount is only inches deep. When one dons a diving mask and descends below the surface a whole world opens up. The illusion is reversed flattening everything above the
waterline while visually expanding the size of the pool to many times its actual size. Sound is muffled dulling the sense of hearing while light rays dance and refract through the water giving tangibility to light that we normally interact with thoughtlessly. The water becomes a visceral world that is in complete, direct contact with surface of the body creating a sense of envelopment that is in opposition to the visual expansion of the space. In this environment, we become aware that we have left the world of our normal daily lives and have been transported to a fantastical new place. Stereoscopic cards from the late 1800’s depict the springs as a recreational and tourist destination. When viewed through a stereoscope, the images converge to create a sense of three dimensional depth in the photograph. This visual phenomenon gives the viewer a slight sense of being physically located in the place where the image was created -- a sense of physical familiarity with a place you have never physically been.

In his book *Journal of Light* Floridian nature photographer and Gainesville native John Moran writes about Blue Hole Springs at Ichetucknee Springs State Park, “Nowhere in Florida have I seen light underwater that feels so divinely inspired.” (Moran 57) Moran’s iconic image of a diver bathed in light in the Blue Hole Spring is an expression of his experience of the natural resplendence of this underwater world. Moran portrays Florida as a place where pristine beauty in nature is always waiting to be found by anyone who looks for it. His familiarity with the landscape of the region he lovingly calls home allows him to regularly leave urban life to encounter magnificence in the wild. To the viewer his photographs are beautiful images of wild Florida, but for him they are records of having witnessed that beauty in person and an effort to re-capture or fix that transitory experience.

Margaret Ross Tolbert is another Gainesville artist and springs enthusiast. Her paintings capture the shades of cerulean blue that define the springs while her *Sirena* series uses lenticular panels to describe the prismatic effects of light in the springs. In her book *Aquiferious* she explains her choice to make art about and to be an advocate for the springs as a matter of personal connection to place. She
writes, “These subjects I love, the springs of Florida, are fragile and their character and existence are under siege.” (Tolbert 67) Her fondness for these special locations and wish for others to share this affection is the driving force behind the artwork she makes about the springs. Tolbert regularly travels to the springs to paint on site in an attempt to capture the fleetingness of the sublime experience she finds there.

Growing up in West Virginia, going to the river to swim was a regular summer activity for me and my family. After the day’s work was done, we would load up in the car and head to the river to escape from the heat. Snapshots taken with cheap disposable cameras show a happy family frolicking in the water. Looking at these old photos conjures memories of those happy times together on vacation. Upon being introduced to the springs two summers ago I found a place that, although different from the rivers of my childhood memories, served the same purpose for people to have a special experience out in the natural world. I quickly realized that the springs and time spent there would become some of my most treasured memories of my sojourn in Florida, and I needed to make sure I collected keepsakes to use as reminders for myself in the future. Being an artist, I decided to make artwork about my awareness of how these souvenirs will help me fondly recall my time here.

*Returning to the Light*

*Returning to the Light* is an intermedia installation exploring the interplay of imagery and form as a representation of the relationship between connection to place through experience and the urge to try to recreate or recapture a glimpse of remembered splendor. The artwork is presented in an idealized way that reflects my personal affection for the subject matter, and seeks to inspire a resonant sense of affection in the viewer while creating a changing ephemeral experience that shows the events and places as a living memory.

*Ceramic Monoprints*
Returning to the Light (fig. 1) brings rich, full-color, photo-analogous imagery to ceramic objects through ceramic monoprinting. My process color-monoprint (fig. 2) tablets are unadorned by glaze and are only marginally manipulated by hand. This process introduces imagery to the ceramic form in a way that leaves the surface of the clay apparently untouched. The removal of the artist’s hand from the work presents a photographic representation integrated into the surface of the object and gives the viewer a sense of awareness of the world that is unfamiliar on ceramic objects.

The decision to not manipulate the form or employ processes that would easily identify the object as ceramic is an intentional subjugation of form in favor of image. Unlike paper, clay has an easily perceptible physical dimension. In the case of prints on paper, the image is primary and the paper is most often simply a carrier that does not call attention to itself. These monoprints are physical objects that draw attention to their materiality, and suggest a physical but intangible manifestation of memory.

Material Transformation

Material transformation is an important concept in both artworks in Returning to the Light. The ceramic inner tubes in Shimmer (fig. 3) are mold-made duplicates of an original vinyl tube, and the glass snorkels and fin in Prismatic (fig. 4) are kiln-cast replicas of the actual objects. The material change from vinyl to ceramic makes the form a monument to its original incarnation. The application of white slip and the built-up texture gives the object a bone-like quality. In a sense the inner tube is a fossil of the object people use to float down the river and as such is a carrier of the past experience into the present.

The glass objects also change the perception of the original snorkel and fin. While undisturbed glass may last longer than rubber, it also suggests the fragility of the memory of the experience. The water-like qualities of the glass interact with light in the exhibition to dematerialize the objects and invoke the ephemerality of remembrance.
In both Prismatic and Shimmer the physical properties of ceramics and glass -- specifically the fact that they are at the same time durable and fragile, is used to invoke the way we perceive memory as being both perpetual and mercurial.

Light

Projection of light supplies precise lighting for the ceramic monoprints in Prismatic, and video for both artworks. The video in this installation was made with the same camera that was used for the images in the monoprint and has the same exaggerated saturation and degradation. Moving imagery, fractured across the white border of 32 monoprints, brings motion and a sense of unity to the group. The fragmenting of the video across the gaps between tablets also challenges the viewer to visually assemble the image pieces into a whole suggesting the way fragments of memory are triggered by objects and remembrance.

When used for lighting purposes, the projected light is masked to fall only on the image area of the monoprints, making the light appear to originate from within the objects, creating the illusion of an internal glow. This radiance fosters a greater sense of depth in prints that have white in the image area by making them appear to have a physical depth that exists behind the printed area furthering the sense of dematerialization established by the video.

Shimmer

Shimmer (fig.3) consists of seven ceramic replicas of inner tubes used to float on the water of the springs and projected video of light effects on and in the water. Each object has clear acrylic rods that make them appear to float two to three inches above the floor. The video of ripples and bubbles is projected on the top of the inner tubes and momentarily animates their surface. The water images occupy the space that would normally be filled by a passenger and bars the viewer from
sitting on the tube. This denial of function coupled with the illusion that the objects are floating above the floor causes the viewer to perceive the ceramic tubes as being representations, inspiring recollection of the fugitive sense of being on top of the water on the tubes.

The appearance that the surface of the tube has been ossified (fig. 5) is a comment on our tendency to crystallize moments in our memory. Mark Twain calls this the “petrifying influence of time.” (Twain 204) Because of the association between the function of the original inner tubes as a conveyance, coupled with the memory of the act of floating on the water in the tube, the ceramic tubes become a simulacrum for floating on the springs and for memory floating on top of life.

**Prismatic**

*Prismatic* (fig. 4) incorporates ceramic monoprint images of defining moments from visits to the springs, kiln-cast glass objects that replicate swimming equipment, and projected video that relates to the photographic images in the monoprints. The video illuminates and activates the group of prints and glass articles. (fig. 6) The white space that frames each individual print holds a portion of the light from the video, and, when viewed from a distance, the video image begins to coalesce giving a sense of the special qualities that make the springs a cherished vacation destination. Each image represents an important moment which, when unified by the action in the video, suggests the imperfect way we remember the events of our lives.

*Prismatic* gives each viewer a different view based on their proximity to the installation and what part of the video is playing when they see the artwork. The video provides a unifying narrative when viewed from far away but degrades into moving patches of light when viewed up close, suggesting the bittersweet nature of memories of an experience of transcendence that has passed and cannot be completely recaptured. There is a strong similarity between the way we have unique interactions with this artwork and the way we have individual experiences when we visit the same natural sites.
Prismatic was conceived and realized through a diaristic approach, but each visitor will rely on their own memories of visiting the springs (or alternative memories of treasured vacation moments) for understanding this work of art.

**Conclusion**

I set out in search of transcendent experience in nature. The objects and images I collected become effigies that signify and invoke the memories of that experience but are also an important part of that intangible memory. *Returning to the Light* is my attempt to provide a format that enshrines the experience, but presents a moving, changing, dynamic artwork that evokes the same sense of awe I experienced in my adventures in the Florida springs. I hope this installation inspired viewers to reflect on their own search for positive experiences in nature.

**Biographical Sketch**

Charlie Cummings was raised in rural West Virginia. He attended Berea College (Berea, Kentucky) where he received a BA in Art with an emphasis in Ceramics. Charlie spent several years as a production potter before establishing the Charlie Cummings Clay Studio & Gallery in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 2001. After eight years producing exhibitions artworks by emerging and nationally recognized ceramic artists, Cummings came to the University of Florida in 2008 to study for a Masters of Fine Arts.
Fig. 1 installation view, *Returning to the Light*
Fig 2. Ceramic monoprint from *Prismatic*.

Fig. 3 installation view, *Shimmer*
Fig. 4 Installation view, *Prismatic*

![Installation view, Prismatic](image_url)

Fig. 5 Detail, *Shimmer*

![Detail, Shimmer](image_url)
Fig. 6 Detail, *Prismatic*
References


Bartram, William. *Travels through North and South Carolina [Electronic Resource], Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, ... Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of those Regions; ... Embellished with Copper-Plates*. Dublin: for J. Moore, W. Jones, R. McAllister, and J. Rice, 1793.


