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This proposal aims to discuss three keywords that intrigue the author and help to inform their personal practise that will be analysed using artists, thinkers and images. The area of research being undertaken is best described as 'Implied Presence'. The author's personal practise has shifted from an obsession with portraiture and presence to a focus upon a more subtle concept- 'Implied Presence'. The three keywords chosen concerning that theme are patternicity, signs and connection. In this essay, many ideas around signs and meaning will be discussed in tangent with thoughts about narrative and an individual's influences and experiences.

## **Patternicity**

A common sensation amongst people is that of being watched when we are – to our knowledge – completely alone. Tiny goosebumps begin to form across our skin and the mind begins to run a supercut of every horror film we have witnessed or horrifying tale that has been recounted beside the flickering glow of a campfire. The term 'Patternicity' was coined by American science writer Michael Shermer 'to indicate the tendency of the individual to interpret/attribute meaningful patterns within the immediate environment around them'.

Many moons ago our ancestors may have sensed a rummaging in the tall grass surrounding them and perceived it as a possible threat. The image of a predatory animal may have passed through their brain, encouraging them to proceed with caution. Shermer states in his article that ‘ A type I error, or a false positive, is believing something is real when it is not (finding a nonexistent pattern). A type II error, or a false negative, is not believing something is real when it is (not recognizing a real pattern—call it “apatternicity”)’. For that ancestor standing in amongst the long, tall grass “apatternicity” could lead to certain death. In this instance, our mind's predisposition to look for patterns works as a survival mechanism.

A common pastime is searching for images in the clouds above our heads. Of course, clouds are just clouds but once we begin searching we may just start to recognise Jesus Christ burnt into our breakfast foods or the face of a wailing infant in a photo featuring your great uncle's knees. It has always benefited us to look for and believe patterns, it is much better to see danger where there is none than to assume dangers only exist in our imagination. A person might well see the face of Christ burnt into their toast. As Michael Shermer says- ‘people believe weird things because of our evolved need to believe nonweird things’

Colette Robbins deals with the imagery of Rorschach prints. Pareidolia was previously mentioned in this essay, it is the psychological phenomenon of looking for a pattern where none exists (cloud watching). This is the root of Robbins's exhibition Archaeological Fiction. Her exhibition allows the viewer to project onto the work, searching for meaning.

“Archaeology” in the case of this exhibition is an umbrella term for the historical evolutionary phenomenon of humanity's need for belief systems.’ Robbins creates 2D Rorschach prints and transforms them into 3D objects digitally. Eventually, they are 3D printed and completed with a coat of graphite. This is how her seven totem sculptures were formed for the exhibition. Patternicity is all about what isn't there, what is present and how our minds fill in the blanks. Patternicity is searching for signs, which is our second keyword.



*Figure 1. Colette Robbins,  
Patternicity (2016)*

## Signs

### **SIGNS = SIGNIFIER + SIGNIFIED**

“(A squeeze of the hand—enormous documentation—a tiny gesture within the palm, a knee which doesn't move away, an arm extended, as if quite naturally, along the back of a sofa and against which the other's head gradually comes to rest—this is the paradisiac realm of subtle and clandestine signs: a kind of festival not of the senses but of meaning.)” — *Roland Barthes*,

*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* There are plenty of people that prefer to take things at face value. Mark Twain's Preface to his novel *Huckleberry Finn* reads, "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot". This preface can be read as a reaction to the changing tide of artistic self-consciousness occurring in American literature at the time. However, as an artist, there is so much joy to be gleaned from signs. Signs allow us to open up a whole new dimension of meaning. The Toledo Museum of Art developed 'The Art of Seeing Art<sup>TM</sup>'. It involves six steps to help anyone better understand an image. One must Look, Observe, See, Describe, Analyse, and Interpret.

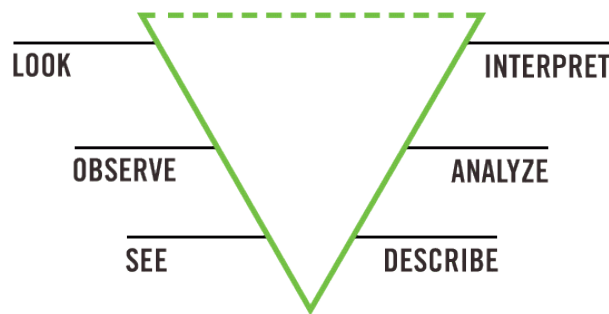


Figure 2 *The Art of Seeing*, Toledo Museum of Art

The Treachery of Images is part of a series of paintings reminiscent of those

found in children's books created by Magritte in the late 1920s. We observe a very realistic image of a pipe and some wonderfully didactic type. The type reads, 'this is not a pipe' and indeed, it is not. It is of course – a painting of a pipe. What the viewer is observing is the image versus the linguistic representation of a pipe. This is perhaps one of the most iconic images of the entire Surrealist movement. To further research signs, the book 'Semiotics: the



basics' by Daniel Chandler was used to explore key thinkers such as Pierce, Saussure and Barthes.

Figure 3. *The Treachery of images*, Renee Magritte (1929)

The idea of 'implied presence' is beautifully illustrated in the photographic works of the artist Todd Hido. It is impossible to separate his landscapes from those familiar to us as used to create an atmosphere in cinema before introducing the characters. The majority of Hido's photographs feature houses. Perhaps at night with a dim glow emanating from a singular window. A pastime similar to the previously mentioned cloud watching would be that of passing by strangers houses and catching glimpses of the lives held within through the windows, piecing together our own Narratives. Whilst viewing these landscapes devoid of the human form it becomes apparent that these images are not about architecture or nature- they are about people. The photographs are so full of signs that lend them more personality than portraiture could ever contain. This is because the stories occurring within the image are the viewers own, threads weaved together from personal experience and films or novels. The possibilities are boundless. It is not the raked up pile of leaves that is fascinating, it is the person that spent hours forming the pile with such care that captures our interest. We know and understand the story being told through Hido's photographs because it is our own. These photographs are worlds away from Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* and yet their use of

signs connects them. These houses and their glowing windows lead onto the final keyword-connection.



*Figure 4. Todd Hido*

*Figure 5. Todd Hido*

## Connection

Connection is 'the state of being related to someone or something else' (Cambridge Dictionary). Both previously mentioned keywords are at their core, about connections.

Looking for ways to connect things so that they make sense to us. Or even looking for a way to connect with others. Whilst patternicity often works as an excellent way of predicting danger, the idea of connection discussed here is more about an invisible link between people.

For thousands of years, humans have sought to find and understand their place in the universe. For some, the idea that there is no greater meaning to life is a terrifying concept, just as the concept of death and no afterlife is also particularly unpalatable. In an attempt to lift the veil on the unknown, humanity has concocted various belief systems. It can be extremely comforting to know that there is a greater plan, a reason for seemingly endless suffering. Artist Ellie Davies's 2018 project 'Fires' is a series of photographs set in the

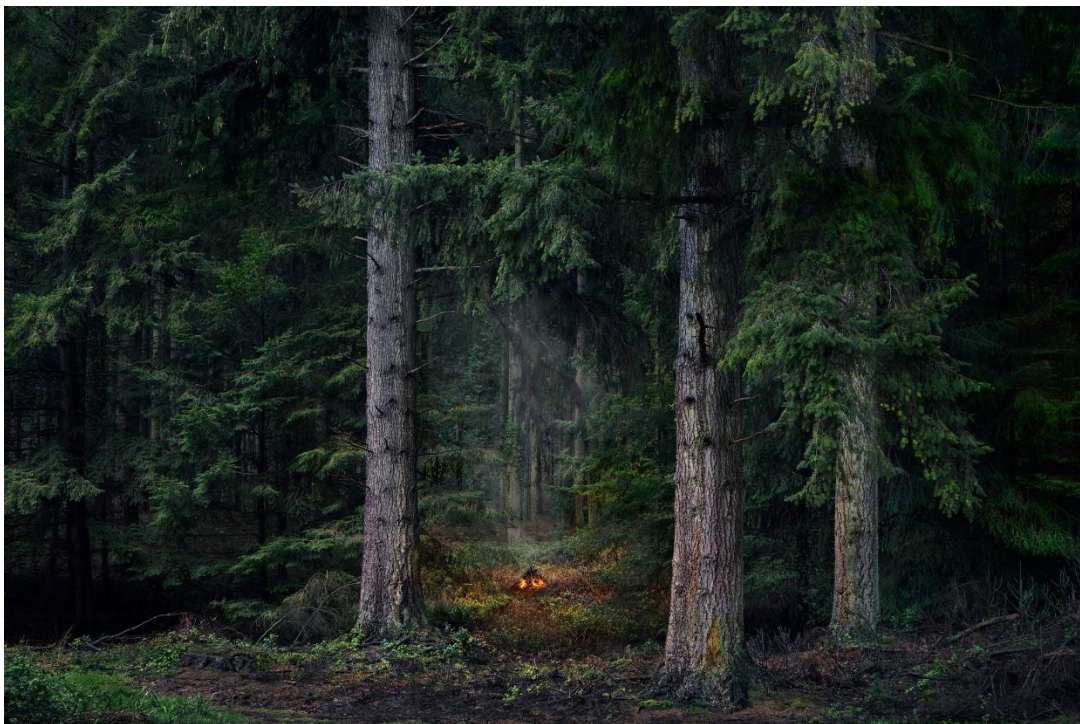


*Figure 6. Ellie Davies, Fires 7 (2018)*

landscape of UK forests. As the title suggests, central to each image is a small glowing campfire. The glow is tiny compared to trees surrounding it and a soft plume of smoke is

rising up into the canopy. Davies says that her work 'explores the complex interrelationship between the landscape and the individual. Our understanding of landscape can be seen as a construction in which layers of meaning that reflect our own cultural preoccupations and anxieties obscure the reality of the land, veiling it, and transforming the natural world into an idealisation'. Davies's work is purposefully non-intrusive, she attempts to leave as she finds.

The simple motif of a fire encompasses so much about humanity and our survival. Darwin considered fire to be one of humanity's greatest achievements. It provides light and warmth, helped us to cook and make tools- we take fire with us wherever we go. That small fire implies presence. The images are so beautiful and almost haunting because they represent safety in amongst the darkness of the trees. Light is a very powerful tool in aiding the implying of presence, even the absence of light, a show can help to create a truly intriguing piece of art. The forest also brings up another way we hunt for connections. Dark and foreboding forests feature heavily within the work of The Brothers Grimm however, these stories are simply retellings of various folk stories from all across the land. They serve as a spectacularly effective way to warn children about the dangers that surround us constantly but also, folklore works as a way to often explain the unexplainable and it keeps us connected throughout the generations. Keri Oldham creates huge watercolour tableaus depicting various

borrowed elements from folklore and mythology. Her latest body of work was for an exhibition entitled, 'Between the Walls'. Oldham describes the work as being about 'the intimate spaces we live in and the kinetic energy we leave behind.'



*Figure 7. Keri Oldham, from the series Night Fortress*

A good area to focus on when it comes to the concept of implied presence is that of a home.

Oldham speaks of 'the kinetic energy we leave behind' and that is a very powerful idea. Every

home has its own atmosphere, scent and energy. The reason we often believe a place to be

haunted is related to the energy it gives off. We look for signs and patterns that will inform us about a place and its inhabitants without ever meeting them, we may even be separated by decades but still, a certain energy lingers. Oldham's slightly menacing and bloody tableaux give off a very haunting atmosphere using plenty of motifs and images from folklore to translate energy that isn't visible to the naked eye.

To conclude this dissertation proposal, the destinations our minds arrive at when bearing witness to a trace have been explored. How an atmosphere and a lack of human presence, can frequently be more emotive than perhaps even the finest portraiture. Patternicity has always existed as an important part of the human subconscious. Humans desperately search for signs and also desire to make connections, be that between situations or between themselves and another. This proposal has explored how these keywords can be used to inform the creation of art devoid of explicit human form. It hints at the existence of an often overlooked world, full of subtle clues and tones. This world doesn't need to raise its voice to be heard. A working dissertation title would be 'Out of sight, in Mind: searching for signs'.

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