

In June of 2010, Italian GEO photo editor Paolo Brivio interviewed Blake Gordon on his Reality TV project, which was featured in the July 2010 issue. Below is the larger correspondence exploring that work.

GEO: You quote Emerson “Why should we not enjoy an original relation to the universe?” Why did you choose this phrase to introduce this project?

BG: That quote is from Emerson's well-known essay Nature, and I think it speaks about a similar vein of knowledge the Reality TV project. Emerson is writing that the great truths religions have discovered are not relegated to ancient texts only to be argued over by scholars, but in the very experience of existence.

This project speaks of a path of knowledge between your being and its environment. It does so by illustrating the rejection of that path through a subject's passive consumption of a sensory experience oblivious to the subject and environment.

In exploring the requisite symbiosis between your being and its environment, you will find your original relation to the universe.

GEO: What is your personal relation with nature?

BG: That is something that has and is continuing to evolve. My inquiry into nature includes humanity. Beyond furthering a physical relationship with nature, I also push a conceptual one through constantly challenging how I conceive of 'nature'.

Nature is a place I have recognized as fundamental source worthy of continual return. I am continuing to learn a variety of ways to ask it various questions. As I go to it, I carry certain things and move in a certain way. Sometimes I bring literary concepts that I sit with in observation of the world. Other times I bring pure physicality designed to overwhelm the body and subdue the analytical mind.

What I find fascinating is that this avenue into nature is something that I came to later in life. I didn't experience any kind of wilderness or camping journey until I was in my last year of college studying landscape architecture. We spent three weeks canoeing in the Canadian wilderness. There was a new sense of opening as my world became much bigger, but it was also a return to way of being that I lived as a child.

The thing that I find undeniable is a hierarchical relationship that unfortunately seems to be absent from much of our thinking in this country. And that is, that human systems and social systems operate within and rely upon natural systems. I find that nature is a doorway to a larger understanding about our relation to the universe.

Lately, I have been looking for nature in hidden places. Over the past few years I have been walking around various US cities at night, refining and overlaying the structure of a wilderness experience onto an urban environment, which is a place we regard as non-natural. There have been some fascinating lessons learned in this experiment. Nature can be found anywhere, if you know how to search for it. I think it was William Blake who spoke about it in “every grain of sand”.

GEO: I have seen that in most of your features you portray and are connected deeply to nature and to natural ways of moving on earth (there is a story of a journey by bicycle - there is the flight - there is adventure).

BG: That's very perceptive. I think it's something I've naturally been drawn to and have only recently understood its influence in my work. The journey is an incredibly valuable structure that shows up throughout human cultures. It sets intent and a departure point. You know where you are going and where you've come from. Less certain is what will be encountered, but that initial orientation provides a way of measuring those things.

Physical movement makes visible points of contact between you and the world. The body is a critical tool of perception that I often use in my work. It is activated through movement. A skilled refinement of movement, whatever it may be, brings about a more intimate experience. At a further point the dialogue develops into harmonious song.

In our field study of Algonquin National Park in Canada (my initial wilderness outing), canoeing became a method of perceiving space shaped by natural processes. By recognizing ourselves as a tool to measure the world we could also become aware of our own response to place throughout our journey. I am fascinated by the body's dual sensing of inward and outward - something that is not possible with objective scientific instruments.

As a naturalist, climbing can be a way of inquiring into geology. Skiing is a way of decoding the knowledge of hydrology and meteorology. But the movements of those sports relate that knowledge to the human scale and human body. It is a way of bridging the divide we construct between human and nature. Relating that intimate knowledge to others requires an understanding of your own subjective context, the layers of your history and your relation to the universe.

GEO: In Reality TV you add something external: people watching TV, raptured by TV in the middle of amazing landscapes. Why? What do you want to express?

BG: I think the piece is a larger commentary on my work. Rather than engaging in the world around him or her, the subject is arrested in a passive relationship. The TV will not respond to the viewer.

Life is a creative act. Watching television is akin to a vegetative state that requires nothing from the body or mind. We take this behavior as normal. By placing this passivity in the context of the world I seek, it is bizarre and possibly disturbing. In doing so I hope to promote an active search for what Emerson calls "an original relation to the universe."

GEO: Moreover, where did you shoot these images? Did you travel a lot? With friends and carrying a TV on your car ready to be used for a photo? Did you stage all of them or did you process them?

BG: I carried the unmanifested idea with me for sometime before I realized that it was nothing unless I created it, primarily because I could speak about it no other way. Eventually, I got a hold of a broken TV for free and set about to make it glow.

First, I powered it through a car battery and inverter. Later, I gutted it and powered it through a smaller battery and an automotive fog lamp, which lightened it by about 40 pounds. This made it a lot easier to haul around. The glow is important because I wanted the viewer to be immersed in that glow and almost constrained by it.

To be honest, the initiation of this project was a bit of a lonely time. I was roaming around the American Southwest constantly between jobs and living situations. It can be very disorienting and damning to not have a career path in America. I thought I lacked the intent (apparent in a journey) that I spoke about earlier. As there was such an incredibly strong force present, I've found in hindsight that my fault was in not recognizing and empowering it. This project is a rare early example of recognizing that internal force and heeding its call.

Many of these places I visited alone. I ended up carrying this TV around with me (and often times all my other belongings) and taking photos at various places I visited. I brought along a tripod and I became the subject in many of these images. As it developed, I began to ask others to stand in.

They scenes are created, but it is also a moment documented. The only illusion is that there is something on the TV. I suppose I find the reality of a blank glow even more poignant.

GEO: How strong is your criticism on TV? What else do you criticize here beyond TV or, on the contrary, are you suggesting loving and appreciating something else instead?

BG: The television is really just a very appropriate symbol. However, I have rarely watched TV in the past 8 years and found my life much more fulfilling because of that choice. I spend too much time on a computer or engaged with the internet. They're amazing tools, but can be incredibly powerful tools of consumption as much as creation.

I criticize consumption and promote creation. Go. Be. Do.

It's a message intended to remind myself as much as anyone.

Images from the Reality TV project can be viewed at www.blakegordon.com