

# Artist's Statement

An artist's statement is, perhaps, more easily defined by what it is not than by what it is. It should not necessarily explain your work. If, after all, one could easily and casually explain what one does, it might not be worth doing. Rather, the statement is an opportunity for the artist to establish the context within which the work may be understood and to provide the necessary framework for reception and criticism. The most successful artists' statements stir in the reader the interest to view or re-view the work.

There is no conventional length or format for an artist's statement. At least there is no point in adhering to any. It should be as brief or as thorough as you feel necessary. For the purpose of this class, however, I have set a **minimum** of one full typed page. If a bibliography or resume is appropriate to your work, include this **in addition** to the statement.

Here are some excellent tips from artist Nayland Blake:

*1. Tell the truth. Describe your work, and your life as it is, not as you think someone wants to hear it to be. Don't anticipate your reader's biases.*

*2. Write often. Get into the habit of writing about what you do on a regular basis. It will give you much more material to pick from when the time comes for you to make a formal statement.*

*3. Rewrite often. It's much easier to edit and rewrite an existing piece than it is to generate something new on deadline. Revising allows you to sharpen ideas and cut out redundancies. Allow yourself to make messy first drafts and then go back into them.*

*4. Use specific examples. Watch out for generalities about your work. If you want to make a point about how an idea functions for you, show how it functions in a specific piece. Don't feel like what you have to say has to be equally true of everything you make. Practice describing pieces as if your audience was sightless.*

*5. Use history sparingly. Don't assume that everyone will know what you mean when you refer to the work of other artists or artistic movements: their ideas may well be antithetical to yours and your point may be lost.*

*6. Big words do not make your work look better, or make it any more meaningful.*

*7. Phrases to watch out for:*

*a. "As a..." often used to sneak in biographical information and as justification for the work, i.e.: "As a veteran my work is concerned with the ideologies of bodily distress..."; "as a volcano survivor I want my pieces to have a certain vibrancy..." Find another way to tell people who you are and why you do what you do.*

*b. "The viewer is invited..." or any of its variations. Often folks use this to try to force people into a specific experience of the work. It begs the questions How and Why is the viewer invited.*

*c. "Interest, interesting, interests..." Try writing about your enthusiasms rather than your interests.*

*d. "The body..." Resist the temptation to make an idea sound more theoretical by sticking the word "the" in front of it. Always ask yourself "which body, or whose body."*

*8. Finally, imagine that you are writing in sand, not carving in stone. Your artist's statement is not a contract made for all eternity: it is a snapshot of your thinking about your practice at a specific moment.*

*Nayland Blake  
1.25.05*

I would add one more to this list:

9. Remember that your statement is not a "piece", i.e., a work of art. Unless you are a poet (and maybe even if you are), refrain from penning a statement that requires another statement to be understood.

I will work closely with you on editing this statement, but will require you to produce the first draft by the date indicated in the online syllabus.

Kathleen Henderson

After I left art school with a BFA in painting, I started painting for a living. I painted the outside of a small group of tiny Caribbean shacks for a Derek Walcott production at the Hasty Pudding. It was a musical and I painted them pink and blue and yellow. I painted the inside of a make-believe submarine for a film called Sphere, so that Dustin Hoffman and Sharon Stone could pretend to be 1000 feet under the sea looking for aliens from the future. It was mostly gray-green and built on a real-life naval base. I painted Don Johnson's bathroom (off-white) on the set of a TV show called Nash Bridges. It was not a fictional bathroom for fictional bathroom activities, but a real bathroom for real bathroom activities. I painted "old master" paintings for an upscale whorehouse 20 miles north of Boston, Massachusetts. The house had a deep red carpeted stairway and the paintings were made to look 17th century Dutch, more or less. I painted out the yellow traffic lines down the middle of the road at the Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center in Marin, California so that Uma Thurman's space vehicle in the film Gattaca would look sufficiently futuristic. I used three different shades of grey. I painted my friend Gianni's face onto the body of Mercury on a fresco in Italy. Mercury's real face had been scratched out by vandals. His mother was pleased by this. I painted an almost life-size model of a Catholic church inside a Sheraton Hotel in Boston, Massachusetts for a luncheon for Cardinal Law. It took three weeks to build and one week to paint. It was white and the lunch was short. I painted a stage, red, white, and blue for Ross Perot's embarrassing run for the presidency. That was a real low point. I painted a starry sky for an Aretha Franklin concert privately held for health insurance executives from around the country. I painted the outside of Professor Brainard's house in a Disney film called Flubber. My French friend, Doucette (not her real name) was incensed that Disney would make a film about Flaubert. I assured her the film was about flubber, flying rubber, and an absent-minded professor's search for a new energy source and not about Flaubert or Madame Bovary or anything like that. I even painted the main ring for Barnum and Bailey's circus, where the elephant mostly stands. This was red, white and blue and smelled badly of elephant dung. I don't paint much anymore, I mostly draw.

## Justine Kurland artist statement

My work has always taken me to the road.

For the past ten years I have criss-crossed the United States in search of willing subjects to photograph. When my son Casper was born in 2004 the road no longer belonged only to me. Living together in a minivan for the better part of each year I was forced to modify every aspect of the road trip in order to accommodate this small person.

Trains slowly became the central force in our lives. Our cramped quarters were outfitted with four large storage containers full of toy trains and by the time Casper turned two he was obsessed. We stopped at every railroad museum we could find, listened to the Smithsonian Folkways recordings of classic railroad songs in the car and, for diversion on longer stretches of highway, trespassed onto the federally protected railyards in order to have a closer look.

Eventually, I began photographing the trains. The first day I set up my 4x5 camera along the tracks my son kicked the tripod and yelled, "No photographing, Mama!" He had just turned three, and my gift to him had been rejected. I've often wondered what Brice Marden's paintings would look like if he were to hold his child on his hip while he painted. Would bunnies or trucks appear among the lines? Or, what if an artist's struggles with parenthood were as romantic as an artist's struggles with heroin? They are not. And still... I continued photographing trains.

Being new to the world of the rails I often misunderstood the information provided on web-based user groups and Casper and I occasionally found ourselves waiting as long as six hours for a train that never came. Sometimes the tracks would be dead, or trains would be diverted for track workers. Often, as though through our vigil we were becoming part of the history of trains, just waiting was enough. Once, when waiting became unbearable for Casper he broke free and ran through the tall grass of the industrial wilderness lining the tracks. Yelling out, "I don't need you, I don't need anybody!" he was already showing the signs of the budding hobo.

Guided by a copy of "Crew Change," a reference for hopping trains, I met kids who flew signs asking for money and I spent evenings drinking beer with them and petting their dogs. I crossed paths with activists, the descendants of the Wobblies, the first to use the rails to spread their labor politics. I spent a week with a wilderness squatter who cleared non-native invasives from the forests where he lived. Cuervo, who I followed through California periodically over two years had given up trains; when I met him he had just walked from Mexico to Northern California with 3 burros, a dog, and a wolf.

We were constantly dodging the railroad police. I once scooped up my child and threw him over a fence thinking they had sent dogs after us, but it only turned out to be a wild boar. Many policemen wrote down our identification information, issued warnings and one told me, "It's a crying shame you don't cut that boy's hair!" Sometimes it was easier to just let them think Casper was a girl as they patted him on the head and called him "sweetheart." An officer I met in the Colton Yard was sympathetic. He pointed me in the right direction and later showed me

his own photographs of trains. Having just finished reading a biography about Billy the Kid, I immediately recognized this policeman as Pat Garret.

Riding the rails was an adventure on which I never dared take Casper. The inner circle of these modern hobos, their lives on the trains, remained outside my reach. Instead, I took a distanced view, my subjects gleaned from the intersection of our reality as railfans and our potential as riders. While I photographed trains Casper whispered the name of each car as it passed, "tank, gondola, hopper, hopper, hopper..." I made portraits of fellow travelers as Casper sang to us in melodies borrowed from Woody Guthrie. I pointed my camera towards history and at the same time recorded my growing son as he collected ladybugs from the fennel beside the tracks.

The resulting photographs are portals into the realm of railroad folklore. We who are brave enough (or stupid enough) to become explorers today, when all available land has been conquered and occupied, can still be, I believe, the builders of a new world and a new consciousness. The American frontier may have been settled, but America is, in another sense, unsettling rapidly. From our disappointment with decades of broken promises, we are breaking free and running into the industrial wilderness, calling out, "I don't need you, I don't need anybody!"

Jean Marie

Once Removed : *The Day Books of Margaret Jurigian*

Once Removed is based on the extremely sparse photographic archive of Margaret Jurigian, an Armenian immigrant living in Boston who died from the 1918 influenza pandemic at the age of 27. A supposed opera singer at the Boston Opera House, she took to the stage one rainy night, caught cold and died within three days. There is very little information on Margaret save for sketchy anecdotes passed down from the friends and family who knew her.

Writing under the guise of Margaret (MJ), I (JM) set out to narrate her life through fictitious and fragmented journal entries. Photographs of Margaret culled from my personal family archive, as well as appropriated images from public access resources, serve as inspiration and anchors to the text. The text and image, when mixed and juxtaposed, begin to compose a narrative that not only wanders through the boundaries of truth and daydreams, but more importantly, attempts to imagine a life that was never fully realized as it coalesces with my own. This project is a continuation of my long held interest in family archives and the interior worlds that I lovingly occupy with these historic ghosts.

WB

After living in twenty-one homes the domestic environment became my studio. Over time I established a methodology for inhabiting domestic space on a tight schedule, and when given the chance to settle down I planted roots; collected old fabric, painted every room, and bought cookbooks on Ebay that had belonged to faceless American grandmothers.

My work explores the effect of physical spaces and places on the mind and vice versa. I confront the challenges of day to day logistical circumstances such as geographic location, gender, family, and social class by manipulating tactile everyday materials such as fabric and food. *Home Studies* delves into the subconscious patterns and questions in my mind about the circumstances of my life and of those around me.

Flatness, frame, time, and lighting allow me to relocate elements of interior spaces and exterior places that people choose to surround themselves with. By transforming my subjects in numerous visual and physical ways, even everyday objects obtain the potential to outgrow their original purpose; something that perhaps [at present] only exists within the space of a photograph.

Rory Mulligan  
Artist Statement  
Aaron Siskind Foundation Grant

The group of photographs I have submitted is part of an ongoing comprehensive project exploring the physical geography and mythical history of the lower Hudson River Valley of New York. I grew up in Yonkers and currently live in Hastings-on-Hudson, just north of that city. My approach to photography has always lay somewhere between reality and fiction, using the raw material of what I find and scenarios I orchestrate to create a nebulous visual world. This area is teeming with history, from the fiction of Washington Irving and John Cheever to the real life horror of the Son of Sam murders to more contemporary incidents like the train derailment at Spuyten Duyvil (“Spouting Devil”) and a macabre scene this April in which the cadavers of 25 cats were found in plastic bags hanging in a park in Yonkers. For me, these incidents and the landscape are all strongly connected. I am in the process of creating a body of work dealing with the way photography can utilize the history and fiction of a particular landscape to reveal connections between past and present.

All of these incidents I am interested in and wish to further explore in my photographs are not just connected by this particular area, but by another issue I have been exploring in my work for several years now. Most of my photographic output up to this point has dealt with my own issues pertaining to other men and masculinity—namely my sense of dislocation stemming from my discomfort with the rampant machismo the real and art-historical world is dominated by. I see this project as continuing that train of thought in a more severe and direct, yet abstract manner. These violent and traumatic acts are all committed or narrated by men. The strong connection between men and violence is complicated, but undeniable. I am deeply committed to this project and envision myself working on it for years to come.