

ICP Alumni: John Michael Kilbane (CP 2017)

ICP alum John Michael Kilbane (CP 2017) discusses his personal practice and his series *Desire Lines* with ICP Alumni and Development Projects Sr. Coordinator Sasha Bush (ICP-Bard MFA 2017).



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Sasha Bush: You graduated from ICP's One-Year Certificate Program in Creative Practices in 2017. What does your practice look like today?

John Michael Kilbane: Since I've left school, my art practice is mainly about putting my head down and photographing whenever and wherever I can. It begins with me thinking—but not too hard—about an area I haven't been in a while. Or an area I feel I want to go back to, either driving or taking the subway there. Then it's usually just a few hours of walking and photographing. The necessary work for me is just getting out and photographing, even if it's not towards a specific end or project. What I need to improve on is staying home and putting the pictures together into a book or zine.

SB: Tell me about your ongoing series *Desire Lines*. How did it come into being?

JMK: This series came about because a friend, Anna Minzer (CP 2017), generously suggested we put on a show of my work in an empty bedroom in her apartment in Queens. We set about it pretty seriously, selecting pictures from a body of work I have been making along the Brooklyn-

Queens Expressway and other highways in New York City since my time at ICP. Anna and I looked at digital files and prints for what must have been hours, selecting a wide edit at first. Then we tried to get close to something that would be manageable to get framed and up on the walls—something that really worked as a whole. The pressure of a show really forced me to look hard at all the images I had been making and figure out what I thought they might be suggesting as a group. I have continued adding to this work, and probably will photograph in these places for as long as I live here in New York.



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SB: I'm curious to know about your process. How did you start this project? Did you feel especially good about a single image, or a set of images? Or with a preconceived theme and a list of places in the city you wanted to photograph?

JMK: The project started in 2016 as part of a class taught by Darin Mickey on the “experience of place.” I had a few ideas of projects I might do around this idea, but the top of the list was to photograph along the BQE and see what came of it.

The initial attraction to that area was due to my living right next to the section that cuts down Third Avenue in Sunset Park. But what I thought made it worth pursuing was the history behind the road, and the changes its construction wrought upon the New York landscape long before my time. As I continued working, that history seemed to have little to no effect on the way I photographed, and the way I made what I thought were successful pictures. So yes, I had a place in mind that was generally “anywhere under or over or around the BQE.” It has since expanded to

the Prospect Expressway and the Long Island Expressway, but now those are just places where I tend to find photographs I like, less than subjects in a document of the city.

SB: What drew you to the places you photographed in *Desire Lines*?

JMK: By now I think I've covered so much ground that when I go out to photograph I'm almost always returning to a place I have been before, even walking the same side of the street in many cases. It has begun to feel like I am checking-up on what's different this time; what's changed from pictures I have taken before.

I have come to like photographing the same place over and over, because I know I would never be able to make the same picture again. The time of day, time of the year, and the leaves on trees all might point me towards a new way of seeing that space. While I was out photographing today, I realized these highways might be interesting to me because they provide a bold structure to photograph against. That sort of ubiquity, which seems to be spreading through most metropolitan areas, does not usually afflict the areas that surround these places.



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SB: I think of *Desire Lines* as raising a set of questions rather than trying to prove a set of answers. What questions are you asking with this project?

JMK: I wish I could be more specific, but I think it really comes down to something as simple as “What would it look like if I personally photographed along these urban highways in New York?” Part of why I felt like the phrase “desire lines” fit this series was because of the feeling these photographs give off, a type of longing. There was something emotional for me in these spaces, despite how utilitarian and alienating they might seem from a driver’s point of view.

Desire lines are formed by pedestrians finding the shortest distance from place to place, veering off a determined path and changing the landscape. I am photographically invested in these places, especially the places I have returned to the most. If I am doing it right—which I’m never sure I am—the pictures might continue to offer some new bit of insight as I or others return to them over time. The last thing I would want to do is to have photographic answers that describe definitively or clinically what it looks like to be in a place.

SB: You are originally from Chicago; what brought you to New York City? What were your early impressions of the city—how did you physically orient yourself and how did you relate to the architecture and public spaces here?

I moved to New York City to work at a literary magazine. I pretty quickly got myself a bike and used it to get everywhere. Over time, I think cycling gives you a great sense of the city and how neighborhoods and the landscape fit together. About two months in, I was biking at a pretty quick

clip up First Ave when I was about to follow a car through a yellow light at 14th Street, the driver had second thoughts and hit the brakes. I hit his bumper and ended up face down in his trunk, covered in glass. Remarkably I was mostly fine and the driver wasn't too mad, but it now feels like a singular moment in how I regard New York. Just when you think you've got it all figured out, the city finds a way to quickly rid you of that notion. I have since tried to keep that respectful distance towards this place.

SB: The photographs in *Desire Lines* seem to be the result of a deliberate search for places you know well, rather than a finding of new locations you're unfamiliar with. Is there a difference to you?

JMK: I think the pictures in *Desire Lines* wouldn't have been made without returning to the same places over and over. While there is certainly something stimulating and exciting about photographing in an unfamiliar place for the first time, I think some of these pictures were possible precisely because that stimulation had worn off and I knew I'd be able to return again. I would like to think that is when lingering and consideration can lead me somewhere beyond where I would have been able to go before. Returning to the same places over and over lets me stop thinking about directions and getting lost, instead allowing me to be open to finding.



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SB: Do you think about theatricality at all with this work?

These pictures are more about the visual pleasure of sustained looking. Only with this attention do I begin to notice the corners of the frame and the colors. I am drawn back to the vibrant green of the trees and the tire marks of the dirt. I return because those colors are so satisfying to look at.



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While I wouldn't say theatricality specifically, I might call it a mise-en-scene in that I have considered how to arrange everything in the frame. I think what excites me about some pictures is when they are so considered and descriptive but a conclusion remains out of reach. Ambiguity and suggestion is all we get, despite the precision offered by this medium. I think we would all get bored of photography if it were able to cleanly convey all the intentions of its makers.

SB: Your photographs work as singular, stand-alone images—they speak for themselves without any additional information needed to enjoy them. Still, your presence fills the frame in your choice of composition and framing. How do you think of singular images, and what happens to them when you combine them in a sequence?

JMK: When I am out making new pictures, I don't think about fitting them into a sequence. But it is probably impossible not to have the influence of prior pictures floating around the back of my mind when I am looking through the camera. With that caveat in mind, I would say I try to make each image as strong as possible on its own and worry about the sequencing of the work later.

With sequencing *Desire Lines*, I think there is a sort of formal rhythm in a lot of these pictures that can either go well next to another image with a similar rhythm or be scattered throughout as a motif. Also, graphic elements like horizons, shadows, and shapes might string a phrase of images together. I was also interested in playing with repetition in this sequence, by including a few pairs of images that were either the same frame, but different planes of focus, or two frames taken very close to one another. When you add all this together, either on the wall or in a book, ideally the pictures build on and inform one another and you reach someplace that none of the images alone could take you.



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