Connections: Life, Memories, and Metaphors Through the Window

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Connections: 
Life, Memories, and Metaphors 
Through the Window 

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Abstract

Photographic imagery can transport a person mentally and emotionally to another place or another time, and create connections to people, memories, or experiences. A photograph can also conjure emotions or serve as a metaphor for something wholly unrelated to the image but triggered in our minds by our own history and impression of the image. Photographs can capture transitions and expanses of time by showing the movement of light, or via comparison in a series of images taken over periods of time.

My work has evolved to incorporate a series of images that focus on windows. Throughout the history of photography, the window has been a strong visual and metaphoric device. Windows can serve as a view within a view, a frame, a barrier, a layered reflection, or a voyeuristic peek inside the life of another. My thesis work explores the many ways that window imagery can invite a viewer to share a space or a view. Although my work is ultimately a reflection and connection to my own journey through the world and to my memories and encounters, it is also my goal to create a feeling or reaction in the viewer as they pull from their own life experiences and find their own connections and emotional responses within each image.
Introduction

From a very young age, my relationship with the world is tied to the view through my camera. Around age seven, my father built a darkroom in our garage and introduced me to the magic of photography. Little did my father know the profound affect photography would have on my path through life. During my career as a commercial photographer, I successfully embraced many genres and styles of photographic work. Regardless of the job or subject, the most important consideration was always the feeling of being connected to what I was photographing. As my career and my life advance, this desire for connection has grown even stronger. Better understanding of people and places drives my photographic work, and ultimately my relationship to self. I have become much more conscious about the choices made and the characteristics, nuances, moods, and context of any scene or subject. My work has become more conceptual and I find myself constantly drawn to windows. Windows, doorways, and reflections are perfect visual metaphors to articulate feelings of connection and have been used as a device or theme throughout art history. A window represents a transition and can be a barrier or an opening. Windows can create a frame of reference, reflect complex interior and exterior layers, or reveal an intimate perspective. Contemplating the view through a window can transport you to another time or place or create a voyeuristic excitement. My current body of work invites viewers in and allows them to contemplate personal experience through the physical and/or psychological apertures of windows and doors, articulated via the lens of photography. My work explores the many ways that photographic imagery can
represent transitional spaces or time and can capture a connection or a memory that conjures emotion in the viewer.

**Visual Connections**

Photographs are woven into our daily lives and culture, and images can impact our emotions in a variety of ways. In *Photography as Contemporary Art*, Charlotte Cotton breaks down what she sees as the primary forms of fine art photography, and my work relates strongly to several of these categories: story telling; photographing everyday objects in a variety of ways; and the intimate moments in human life and relationships. (Cotton pg. 8) Every human has perspectives and opinions about the world around us, and our individual experiences are unique based on how we live them, our background and education, and the mental and emotional connections we make as we live and experience life. Photographs can remind us of something we have seen or experienced in our past, and can connect us to a memory that creates or brings up feelings and emotions triggered by an image. A person may feel a strong reaction to an image that is infuriating, horrifying, nostalgic, blissful, or another evocative emotion, and those feelings are all due to the connections that the person makes in their own mind. That impression or feeling may or may not be the intention of the artist, or even related to the actual content of the image being viewed, and it is more a result of the chain of mental and emotional connections and experiences in the mind of the specific viewer. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag wrote: “The photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.” (Cole 2018c, pg. 3) We carry our knowledge of life in images and encounters, and we connect and
catalog images and events in our minds. Teju Cole discussed how you can view an image and that mental catalog will start to make a series of connections to things you know and that you have seen or done before. (Cole 2017, pg. 2) A photograph can trigger a memory or an artificial memory – something that we have actually experienced, or something that was experienced in a different way, as story, a movie, or a dream. (Bate, 2010) An image can pull up memory traces. In Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, Barthes discusses “studium and punctum”. Studium refers to the subject or content that is consciously selected to be captured in the image, while punctum is the more subconscious meaning or connection that a viewer makes to an image, which Barthes describes as an involuntary response to a photograph. No doubt we have all had experiences where an image, almost at random, inexplicably makes us react and, because of this, it also surprises us. We look at it more, but it does not reveal what we “see in it”. The image affects us involuntarily. If we follow an associative path for the image to our memory, it can lead to other memories, even a suppressed memory and, with critical work, an essential repressed memory-trace. “It is that moment when with little effort, you can recall a quite obvious personal association as to why you find an image evocative of something in your own experience”. (Bate, 2010) Associations belong to a personal register, and we connect images with intersections of our experiences in complex ways. “As composite formations, photographs, like childhood memories, have a sharpness and innocence that belie meanings that have far more potential significance than is often attributed to them, which means that in terms of history and memory, photographs demand analysis beyond hypnotic reverie.” (Bate, 2010)
Portraiture and Time

One photographic genre that can create strong emotional connections is portraiture. Portraits may pull on our memories and emotions more directly than other imagery due to the associations the images create for us to people we know, have known, or even for those we have never met. In studying the portrait work of Deywoud Bey, his desire to portray people in an authentic environment that speaks to their life and journey truly inspired me to approach my portraiture work in a different way. A portrait image almost always comes with an agenda. People create a vision of or for themselves, want to be portrayed in a certain way, and can use dress or costume, status, location, or other devices to help convey a desired message. Photographers also have their own vision, and can create images in certain light, context, and perspectives that can create an additional layer to the portraits and how they are perceived. These devices and visual conversations lead to far more interesting images and a greater level of satisfaction for both the portrait subject and the artist. It always comes down to making a connection between people. In my MFA work, I created a series of portraits working with high school seniors. I talked to students about how traditional senior portraits for the yearbook come loaded with guidelines from the school and expectations from parents, and these scripted representations of teenagers often do not actually exhibit the way the teenagers see themselves or how they choose to be represented. This work provided strong insight into the importance of understanding and relating with your portrait subjects and how they see themselves.
Bey said in an interview for Bomb magazine that he tries to confront the “aesthetic conundrum of how to represent that which can’t be represented in a documentary way”. He is referring to the desire to make a connection deeper than just recording a face. He said that his images “manifest a keen critical intelligence softened by the ache of an equally keen heart.” He tries to capture the sense of a subjects’ interiorities in relation to narratives about the spaces they inhabit. He is interested in “visualizing the tension and transformation” of people and place. He said, “I want to affirm a subject’s place in the world, where things considered worth our collective attention are captured – you could probably say that I’m a humanist.” (Bury) I believe that he is emphasizing the importance of that underlying reaction (punctum) that an image forms in our minds and emotions, and how that intangible feeling is at least equal in importance to the image itself.

Portraits can also capture a moment in time or convey the passage of time. Artists Deywoud Bey and Rineke Dijkstra both used photography to illustrate the passage of time with portrait subjects. This can be seen in different ways in Bey’s “Birmingham” series and Dijskstra’s “Almerisa” series. Dijkstra’s work in the “Almerisa”
photographs document the growth and transition of an individual as she moves through life and shows a girl growing into womanhood over 20+ years. (Artnet, pg 1).

In Bey’s “Birmingham” project he created diptychs in which he combines one portrait of a young person the same age as one of the Birmingham Church bombing victims, and another of an adult 50 years older—the child's age had she or he survived the tragedy. These images create an immediate comparison and conversation about time.
Viewing this type of work is like transporting through time to glance at changes that take place over time in a very unique way. The street photography of Peter Funch, in his book *42nd and Vanderbilt* also illustrates how you can observe and take photographs of strangers on the street and see how life passes for many people with routines and similarities that we can all relate to, creating commonality and connections between people.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 4.** Peter Funch, *42nd and Vanderbilt*, 2017

**Transitioning**

Researching portraiture in a variety of forms and expanding my own practices lead me to my own exploration of shooting photographs of people on the street thinking about the connection or disconnection we have as we encounter others on a daily basis. I explored photographing total strangers on city streets, buses, trains, and even shooting from the hip without looking through the camera. This exercise expanded into a wider variety of image creation and experimentation with cityscapes, including architecture. I then pulled away from the human subjects and rekindled a personal fascination with reflections, windows, doorways, and layered views. I have always been drawn to windows and reflections and in taking a voyeuristic look at the world inside and
outside the window. The glow of a lamp inside someone’s home in the evening, or the
view of someone lost in thought at a café table through the storefront window has
always intrigued me. The moment of pause and quiet contemplation that stops me to
look in or out of a window, or at a unique reflection, is endlessly fascinating to me. The
confusion of space in a layered reflection; the glow of a light inside or outside a window;
the texture of frost or snow on a window pane; a broken or dirty window; or the warmth
of the familiar view from the windows in my own home; every scenario connects to a
memory, a contemplation of what is to come, or a curiosity about a transitional space or
time in life.

![Frosted Window](image)

**Figure 5.** Cindra Ross, *Frosted Window*, 2019

**Voyeurism**

Photographing people on the street or views through a window can easily be
considered forms of voyeurism, which can draw out strong reactions from viewers.
Windows often serve to separate public space from private space, and a view through a
window can violate that boundary. Voyeurism, especially in the creation of images, can
have either negative or positive implications. Some photojournalist have been criticized
for being voyeuristic when recording images of disasters, wars, or people in crisis
because they took photos of these atrocities and shared them with others, but did not necessarily put down the camera to help or improve the situations that they were documenting. Images of tragedies can be criticized as exploitive of the victims and can also lead to distancing or desensitizing people to terrible circumstances. Voyeurism can be scary or violent if it comes in the form of stalking or watching someone without their permission. Voyeurism can also be innocent, a simple interest, curiosity, or connection to others, real or imagined.

Voyeuristic imagery can draw from principles pursued by both humanist and symbolist artists. Jean-Claude Gautrand provides a beautiful description of “Humanist” photography: “a certain generosity, optimism, sensitivity to the simple joys of life, and empathy for people in the street, caught in action, and for the symbolism of scenes which suggest a common sense of the wonderful.” (Frizot, pg 613) Humanism in art can also overlap in some ways with the thoughts of Symbolist artists who sought to capture things unseen: feelings, spirituality, emotions and even musical qualities. (Frizot, pg. 302) People, and the places that people exist and inhabit, can be very interesting subjects for art, and that many viewers can relate to. Gautrand’s description of Humanist Photography resonated with me, as I feel that it touches on the core of why photography is an important part of my life and my art. The sensitivity to others, an awe of the world around me, and capturing the “wonderful” from my unique point of view, are exactly the sentiments that fuel my own work. Gautrand states, “on the one hand, there are those photographers who ceaselessly pursue the newsworthy, the exceptional, that which sets people apart, and on the other hand, those who are concerned with those things which bring people together.” (Frizot, pg. 613) From the symbolists to the
humanists, many photographers have focused on depictions of life, common scenes and a “real picture of the human condition”, including an attempt to capture how people feel, believe, live and exist in our world. (Frizot, pg. 614) The Photographer Robert Doisneau said: “when I am stressed, I simply go to Paris or to the suburbs […] In this everyday setting I am finally able to take my time, and to enjoy wasting it. In watching things and people whom you might well think devoid of interest but which, if one pays more attention, have buried within them their weight of emotion, feelings of pity, idiosyncrasies. The simple fact of seeing felt like real happiness.” (Frizot, pg. 624) This statement also deeply resonated with me, as my love of photography is a joy of seeing. Whether it is quiet reflective windows and transitional spaces, landscapes or cityscapes, people watching, or a studio still life, my own photography is grounded in the pure joy of seeing and expressing my point of view through my camera. I would equate myself to Izis, a French “visual poet” who Doisneau called a “dreamy wanderer and a marveling passer-by”. (Frizot, pg. 625)

Voyeurism, and specifically views and reflections in windows, is evident in the work of many famous photographers over the last 80 years. Walker Evans, Robert Adams, and Lee Friedlander all took photos of strangers on the street, and in storefronts and windows. Their work shows everyday life and scenes that many people can relate to, even if it is from a different place or time. Some of their views are intimate, and others are distant or isolating, but they all illustrate, and reflect on, the human condition.
Artist Sophie Calle took voyeurism to the extreme when she worked in Venice in 1981 as a chambermaid for three weeks and used her position to go through the rooms and take intimate photos of people’s belongings in their rooms without their knowledge. Calle also published a book called Suite Venitienne about her stalking of a man whom she follows from Paris to Venice and photographed extensively without his knowledge. (Calle)
Street Photographer Alan Schaller likes to visit a place and stay there for a while to study and get to know the people, the area, the architecture, and the movements and patterns of activity of people on city streets. Schaller studied the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and has stated that he is fascinated by the extraordinary moments in everyday life. (Leica, pg. 2)
Following people, watching people, and looking in storefronts and windows can be mesmerizing. A unique observation of the world is a part of a photographer’s way of seeing. Tests have shown that a photographer sees the world differently from a non-photographer – and tend to examine specific scenes or points of interest for a longer period of time. Taking photographs can sometimes make you feel more immersed or involved in a place or experience. (Djudjic) Photojournalism is a formal and accepted form of voyeurism. Good or bad, watching and recording others can both connect us and fascinate us, even when the intention behind the creation of the images can vary widely.

Windows and Reflections

Shooting in the city, I found myself constantly drawn to windows, as frames, as views or as reflections, and the feelings that these compositions create within me. I started to seek interesting window views and moved away from the inclusion of people and began to focus on the quiet and contemplative perspectives that a window brings to an image. The window has been a photographic tool from the very inception of photography. Early images used the window as a framing device, and as a light source. Many photographers have captured images with the window as either a tool or a subject. Joseph Niepce created View from the Window at Le Gras – which is widely considered today as the first photograph. The image was taken over 8 hours looking out the upstairs window of his country home. (Hellman, pg 8)
Many early photos used window light – even if the window was not in the image. Prior to photography, the window was used as a compositional device and a symbol, throughout art history. In the 19th century, particularly in the early decades leading up to the advent of photography, the window emerged as a symbol of vision. “The window offers the link from interior to exterior, from the inner perspective of the artist to the world outside” in order to connect to the viewer. (Hellman, pg 9) Images looking in or out of a window make it possible for the artist to share with the viewer an intimate glimpse of their personal daily view. The inclusion of a physical window frame as a tool has been utilized and discussed by many artists. Leon Battista Alberti, an Italian Humanist Painter, came up with a theory on framing and perspective using the window, which came to be known as “Alberti’s Window”. His method used the idea of the open window as a framing device and initiated “centuries of theory and debate that spurred artists to either follow this idea or reject it”. (Hellman, pg 9) Many artists have been inspired by windows, as this quote from Andre Kertesz, a Hungarian Photographer who moved to Paris in 1925 and loved to see the city through his window, illustrates: “like the
expressive eyes of a new face, the windows represented a language and a cityscape that can be explored both literally and photographically." (Hellman, pg. 8) Karen Hellman writes: “Windows have been compared to eyes. Not surprisingly, “eye” is half of the etymological root of the word “window” (from the Olde Norse Vindauga, or wind eye). As the eyes of the façade or face of a building, windows can be either open, as in Kertesz’s 1925 view in Paris, allowing us to see into the interior, or shuttered and impenetrable. The same can be said of a portrait, as in the proverbial saying that the eye acts as a window to the soul, it can show us the sitter’s soul or block it from our view.” (Hellman, Pg. 12)

![Figure 11. Andre Kertesz, Rue Vavin, Paris, 1925](image_url)

Many people think that looking through a camera and looking through a window are metaphorically linked. “The window is linked in a symbolic way to the mechanics of photography. It is an opening, framing device, or viewfinder through which images are seen or reflected. A photograph of a window is a ‘view of a view’”. (Hellman, pg 7) Window imagery can conjure many connotations and, when included in a photograph, a window can create links in our minds to people, moments in time, or places that we remember or dream about. In the 1978 exhibit at MOMA – Mirrors and Windows:
American Photography since 1960 curator John Szarkowski asked “What is a photograph? Is it a mirror reflecting a portrait of the artist who made it, or a window through which one might better know the world?” (Hellman, pg.17)

Photographers can use windows and other architectural features to create portals, or specific compositions that imply ideas about space and time. As discussed earlier, artists can use photographs, especially a series of photographs, to show the passage of time. Photographer Uta Barth uses images of light and windows to create a narrative about time and space. Barth states that her work attempts to capture “moments that pass without particular attention” and the “rhythms that live in the subconscious.” (Henkin, pg.1) In her series “Nowhere Near, 1999” she shot images over the course of a year capturing the light, seasons, and times of day, all from a similar view looking through her living room window. (Guggenheim, pg. 1)

Barth seeks to document the difference between how a human sees reality, and how the camera records it. Her images evoke the subtle passage of time and capture incidental and fleeting moments that exist in our periphery, such as how light can create graphic patterns on a window curtain. Barth comments on how she likes to “slow the viewer down” and to seek a calm and quiet space in her work. (Henkin, pg. 1) She
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seeks to provoke contemplation through visual and spatial ambiguity. My own work over the last year has also been more contemplative and calming, and I share Barth’s interest in the window as a framing device and conceptual tool. Her study of light patterns is fascinating to me and has heightened my awareness and consideration of natural light characteristics, as well as the ability to change images by being more patient and shooting the same image at various times of day. Becher School student, Candida Hofer coined the phrase “architecture of absence”, and stated that she sought to find the “spirit within an empty space” (Kordic B, pg. 4) She used architectural features to emphasize structural order in her images. (Polte, pg. 101) “She translated the architecture into spaces organized from a central perspective, which appear as self-contained pictorial surfaces. Movement has been brought to a standstill; the openness and boundlessness when experiencing the architecture defer to a hierarchically organized picture with distinct limits and dimensions.” (Polte, pg.125)

![Figure 13. Candida Hofer, Lesegesellschaft Basel, 1994](image)

Hofer assessed a location to find the picture within the space. She translates the situation at hand into a pictorially immanent order. Hofer sought to open a new association of meaning to the viewer without any alteration or fictionalization of reality.
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(Polte, pg. 192) Windows, architectural features, and light patterns can be captured to create very powerful photographs that can conjure a memory or create a personal narrative for the viewer.

The idea that an image can transport your mind to a different place or time is very intriguing to me as an artist, and this idea opens the possibility for images to become a powerful narrative or storytelling device. Using windows in my imagery has allowed me to create a myriad of connections to my life and to tell stories of my journey. Despite my personal connection, thoughts or memories when creating an image, the resulting art piece can resonate in totally different ways with others, based on their life experiences, and their point of view. A window can be considered as both a connection and as an obstruction. It can join two spaces with a transparent view, or act as a barrier to protect from the outside elements. That interplay of inside and outside, and the point of view that you choose, can be powerful in conjuring emotions, or thoughtful contemplation. There is a “romantic longing to transcend the literal and imagined division between inside and outside”, and this can be reenacted when the photographer looks through the lens and sees an image. (Hellman, pg. 9) In his book *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan talks about the subconscious ideas that flow when looking out of or into a window: “When we look outward we look at the present or future, when we look inward (that is introspect) we are likely to reminisce about the past. Space has temporal meaning at the level of day to day personal experiences. Language itself reveals the intimate connectivity among people, space and time. I am (or we are) here: here is now. You (or they) are there; there is then and then can refer to a time which may be either past or the future. (Tuan, pg 126) The window can serve as an intermediary that
makes possible a momentary mutually agreed upon communication between two people, both of whom are also allowed to maintain their distance as “strangers”. (Hellman, pg 14) Windows can let you see out or in, and windows can also be blocked, to obstruct your view. Some photographers have used the lines, patterns, geometric studies, or window surfaces as the subject of their imagery. Artist Paul Strand took photos of ice-covered windows, in which the accumulated frost and ice patterns cause your view to remain on the surface of the window, studying the textures, tones and shapes that are formed on the glass. A window covering can be partially transparent causing a layered view that can change the mood or impression by forcing you to look through the layers and adding to the statement or emotion of the imagery.

Figure 14. Paul Strand, *Barn Window and Ice*, 1943

Figure 15. Cindra Ross, *Wanderlust*, 2019
Windows can also create reflections. A reflection shows two views “rejecting the idea of a straightforward, unfiltered vision. Reflections create a juxtaposition providing a point of looking out while simultaneously looking in. Almost like looking in as in a day-dream – offering the viewer the opportunity to spiritually transcend the everyday.” (Windows pg 11) Imagery including windows tends to foster many thoughts about time, space, connections and memories. In the *Editorial Special Issue on Photography, Archive and Memory*, the authors note:

“We come to the realization that the past comes to us always in narrative form and that narratives of the past are inflected by the present’s concerns. Moreover, the past is always in conversation with the present, maybe even the future, in a bid to ensure its reproduction. Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between “public” historical events, structures of feelings, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and personal memory. In these cases, histories outer and inner, social and personal, historical and psychical coalesce; and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible. Memory and Photography are fundamentally connected. Although photographs (like all screen memories) are like empty shells that they may be subject to fruitful analysis as our responses to them are both voluntary and involuntary.” (Cross)

An image of a window, through a window, or a reflection in a window can take a person on a mental journey to a memory, a dream about the future, or just to a quiet, contemplative space in their own mind. A window is a physical object that creates a transition: a transition from inside to outside; or a transition between what you can see, hear, or feel between two spaces. An image of a window can record that transitional space, both literally and metaphorically. Gaston Bachelard said, “Something that cannot be located, has lost its quality of “being there”. The horrible “inside-outside” of unuttered words, and unfulfilled intentions. Inside and outside can both be intimate and
the surface between them can waver and tremble and lose its clarity.” (Bachelard, pg 218)

Figure 16. Cindra Ross, In and Out, 2019

A photograph can record an image of a space that is hard to decipher, and when clarity is lost, it allows the viewer to mentally fall into the image and create their own explanation or narrative.

Figure 17. Cindra Ross, Night Lights, 2019

In her book, The Power of Photography, How Photographs Changed our Lives, Vicki Goldberg states, “Photographic images have been altering people’s minds and rearranging their lives for a long time.” (Goldberg, pg. 7)
Conclusion

Photography can create connections to memories, people, and places; it can also provide an impression or implication of the passage of time; and it can even record transitional spaces or create confusion as to what space is being seen. As my work has progressed through landscapes, portraiture, street photography, cityscapes, and windows, all of the work has been a story about my journey as an artist and as a human. My work is about connections, and how an image can tell a story about a person, a location, or even a state of mind or an emotion. In Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard states, “by approaching the images with care not to break up the solidarity of memory and imagination we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth.” (Bachelard, pg 6) The emotions and connections to a specific image are completely unique to the viewer. I may have a very specific idea in mind when creating a photograph, and that meaning can be very powerful to me, but a viewer may interpret and respond to the image with a completely different response. Susan Sontag had some interesting thoughts on the meaning we assign to images. She said, “one can’t possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images” (Sontag, pg. 163). Roland Barthes was adamant that what an artist creates becomes a new entity in and of itself, and that our response to an image can be surprising or beyond our control. (Barthes) In Ways of Seeing, John Berger discusses how the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe, and that we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. He states, “The camera showed that the notion of time passing was inseparable from the experience of the visual. What you see is relative to
your position in time and space.” (Berger, pgs 8-18). Teju Cole has written extensively on the power of the photographic image, and all the ways that we connect emotionally to imagery. Photographers have the unique ability to record images that can illustrate a comparison of or connection between people or places over time. (Cole, 2018, 1) In the creation of an image, I utilize concept, narrative, technical skill, context and environment, and my personal vision to communicate how I see and feel about things and people in the world around me. It is a study of light, humans, spaces and environments where humans exist, and my unique perspective on the relationships therein that drives my work. For me, it is a story about my life and my journey - but how those elements impact and communicate with a viewer through the photographic image is up to each viewer and their life experiences. My goal is to capture a viewer’s interest and to cause a pause for contemplation that may conjure their own connections to a space, face or memory in their own story. Images of our world, and our lives, good or bad, beautiful or tragic, do connect all people, can transport us through time in the recall of a memory, and bond us through our common human emotions and experiences.
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Street scenes, and transitional period of work moving toward windows, and reflections, Winter 2019
Studies of windows, views, and patterns in window frames, Spring 2019
Thesis work on various views through windows, doorways, reflections, and light patterns - Fall 2019