

Anthony Goicolea
Figure/Ground

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Alone, together:

Anthony Goicolea at the List Gallery

By Blake Oetting, List Gallery intern

The List Gallery exhibition *Anthony Goicolea: Figure/Ground* presents its viewers with seemingly divergent photographic series from Anthony Goicolea's career. On the one hand, in the large outer room of the gallery one encounters various landscape scenes, each containing vestiges of human intervention: a crumbling house, a string of lights, a tent, a series of baths. On the other hand, upon entering the back room one finds a series of double portraits lining the walls, each comprised by a positive and negative rendering of one of Goicolea's Cuban relatives. The *Related* series, also on view in the larger room, combines these motifs of nature and technology, earth and the human body. While Goicolea's diverse formats and imagery have the potential to confuse, Goicolea fuses figure and ground—portraiture and landscape—in compositions that express both dislocation and interconnectedness. This catalog will illuminate the ways his techniques and subjects reinforce such themes. In particular, I will examine the way Goicolea digitally manipulates his images (a process he began experimenting with while working at an advertising agency in the 1990s). Such digital alterations and recombinations simultaneously reflect Goicolea's dissociation from a personal history and his effort to bridge, or at least comprehend, that distance. I will also discuss his landscapes as visualizations of the isolation that typifies many twenty-first century subjects' relationship with the earth. Ultimately, *Anthony Goicolea: Figure/Ground* destabilizes the notion of inherent connections among people, and between people and the earth. At the same time, doing this in both personal contexts (the family) and universal ones (the earth), Goicolea's work unites its viewers precisely in that isolation, creating a gallery space of people *alone, together* with both each other and the artist.



Mother I, Left side: Graphite, Ink, and Acrylic on Mylar, Right side: C-Print made from the drawing at left, 23.5 x 13 inches, 2007

Family Portraits

Goicolea was born in 1971 in Atlanta, Georgia to a Cuban-American family that had immigrated to the United States a decade before, fleeing Fidel Castro's dictatorship. Because travel to and from Cuba was heavily regulated throughout his childhood and adult life, Goicolea's connection to his genealogy was tenuous and shaped by inconsistent and exaggerated stories from his mother and grandmother. The goal of creating a connection between his Cuban heritage and life in America has been a persistent motivation for the artist.

The family portraits that occupy the List Gallery's back room are no exception. There are four works in *Anthony Goicolea: Figure/Ground* that are a part of this geneological series: *Mother I*, *Father III*, *Family Grid Positive*, and *Family Grid Negative*. While at first glance each piece may resemble a photograph, its creation involves a variety of media. Using a photograph of one of his Cuban relatives as a model, Goicolea draws its negative. He then photographs that drawing, which allows him to produce a negative of the negative, rendering a close approximation of the original photograph. In double portraits, such as *Mother I* (2007), Goicolea places the drawn negative on the left and the digitally produced positive on the right to showcase this intricate process.



Father III, Left side: Graphite on Mylar, Right side: C-Print from drawing at left, 25 x 12 3/4 inches, 2008

While any exploration of family portraits would intimate a certain fascination with heritage and genealogy, Goicolea's multi-media process calls close attention to his dislocation from Cuba. In particular, Goicolea allows the associations of affect and truth attached to drawing and photography, respectively, to provide contrasting modes of interpretation, and to reveal the subjective and contingent nature of his exploration. In his double portraits, the distorted or abstract character of the negative, already communicated through its color scheme, is amplified through our knowledge that the artist drew it. By drawing the negative, Goicolea seems to suggest that no matter how hard he tries to document the figure, whether it is his mother, his father, or a series of relatives, his efforts will never be wholly scientific but instead inflected with imperfections inherent in our methods of documentation. His drawn negatives, therefore, provide more personal and direct reflections of his own imperfect understandings of each model. The digitally rendered positives, on the other hand, appear to be more accurate. Even though close inspection reveals that they also derive from a drawing, they are produced in a style and color scheme more commonly used when attempting to reproduce reality, evoking the naturalistic tradition of printing and drawing that dates back to the Renaissance.

"Reading" these double portraits from left to right, as one might be inclined to do, would suggest a positivist narrative where we move from the "fake" and idiosyncratic to the "real" and objective. This is certainly one way to understand Goicolea's work: an exercise in progressing from hypotheses about lost familial figures to documented, traceable facts about them. At the same time, Goicolea's process complicates such a unilateral interpretation. Although the positive image appears to be in a representational style that we associate with



Family Grid Positive, ink and acrylic on canvas, 59 7/8 x 33 7/8 inches, 2008

honesty, it is actually produced through digital manipulation. Thus, any indexicality—the ability of the image to stand in for reality—associated with the positive image is questioned. Similarly, the apparent artificiality of the drawn negative is mitigated by the fact that it is presented through a photograph, granting it a certain dose of media-specific authenticity. Consequently, Goicolea destabilizes the boundary between reality and illusion and leaves his connection to his relatives in the portraits in limbo. This ambiguity raises questions for the viewer: Is the hypothetical, ephemeral, and drawn relationship to his Cuban relatives actually inferior? Or, does the negative's personal significance end up creating legitimate, factual, "photographic" family ties? Goicolea ultimately leaves such questions up for debate. Thus, the double portraits appear most immediately as experimental attempts to exhume his Cuban heritage. His process, however, is not only evidence of the artist's understanding and clever manipulation of artistic media and their evocations. It also poignantly echoes the disconnections from his Cuban heritage. Through first drawing, then photographing, then digitally manipulating images of his family, Goicolea's process reflects a growing distance from "knowing" or being able to capture the subject in the original photographs—sources that we (and Goicolea, in many cases) never see directly. As Goicolea says, "Its like a Xerox of a Xerox of a Xerox ... its this idea of a generational remove from the original source that mimics that the literal generational removes ... it was a kind of way for me to own these images..."



Baths, C-Print with acrylic and ink, 46 x 40 inches, 2008

Landscape and nature scenes

Regardless of whether we identify with Goicolea's representations of disconnection from his cultural heritage, his landscapes confront us with an even more universal issue: our growing disregard for and detachment from the natural world. Rather than showing environments that are untouched, however, his photographs feature forests, cliffs, and plains that were formerly occupied by human beings but have since been abandoned. For instance, in *Baths* (2008) we look upon a cliffside, sloping down to the left, upon which a series of saltwater-fed pools have been digitally composited. Drawn and altered in Photoshop, the bath in front of us contains a strange basin-like structure. A similar combination of natural and man-made structures, together with digitally rendered objects, repeats throughout his nature scenes including *Ruins in the Forest*, *The Follow*, and *Tunnel*.



Ruins in the Forest (After Caspar David Friedrich), C-Print on Di-Bond, 40 x 70.5 inches, 2011

Whether depicting a house, deserted baths and tents, or unpopulated farm ground, Goicolea's landscape scenes communicate a sense of abandonment and raise questions: Who was here? What were they doing? Why is there nobody here anymore? The works prompt viewers to reflect on the process of exploring and using nature and its consequences. Or, as Goicolea describes it, we consider a "narrative in the past tense."

While it is tempting to interpret these landscapes as providing commentaries on ecological devastation or climate change, the environments themselves appear to remain intact, even vibrant. Particularly in *Cane* (2009, see last page) Goicolea seems to reference Romantic painters such as John Constable in his choice of a low vantage point and depiction of a large, ominous sky. Additionally, Goicolea makes such allusions more explicit in *Ruins in the Forest*, where he references Caspar David Friedrich in its title. However, through implying that we have cut ties with nature, Goicolea seems to comment on the way twenty-first century society prioritizes industry more than the natural world and how our ideas about nature are constructed rather than intuitive.

Goicolea doesn't only demonstrate physical disconnection, however. Because he employs Photoshop to add foreign elements, the artist also emphasizes the artificial ways human beings interact with the natural world. For instance, in *Ruins in the Forest* Goicolea inserts a dog into the shrubbery in front of the tent, a light fixture on the tree trunk in the right foreground, and a series of potted plants. In doing so, he showcases the way the natural world has become a backdrop for our every whim: the inherent beauty and value of the ruinous site is not enough, more must be added.

Thus, Goicolea's representations of human absence and his use of Photoshop to create fictive landscape scenes reflect the prevalence of physical and social disconnection in contemporary society. At first, the dislocation evident in his photographs may appear as bleak as the detachment we see in his portraits of his Cuban family. However, there is also a potentially uplifting universality to his work. Despite showing our gradual detachment from the earth, or displaying his own estrangement from his family, Goicolea's photographs ultimately unify us through the ubiquity of his themes and subjects. When I interviewed the artist, Goicolea acknowledged this element of his work: "there is an element of nostalgia or longing for something from the past ... there are universal aspects are drawn from it."

Goicolea's estrangement from family and the earth and his effort to bridge these disconnections through photography is most explicit in the *Related* series. In this series of eighteen works hung in a grid (part of an even larger series of up to twenty four works), family portraits—both drawn negatives and Photoshopped positives—are digitally added into outdoor spaces. However, because the scenes recall missing person posters (that Goicolea saw in New York City after 9/11), Goicolea seems to refer to the ongoing human need to connect, discover, and *relate* to both the people represented in the photographs and the world around them. Therefore, *Anthony Goicolea: Figure/Ground* is an exhibition that cleverly presents a problem—disconnection—and provides a creative response to it. Goicolea communicates the loss of familial *figures*, but forges new acquaintances with each viewer who passes through the gallery. He shows the remnants of abandoned *grounds*, but unites viewers in their responsibility to reconnect to the world around them.

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All images courtesy of the artist

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Related_11b, C-Print, 24 x 36 inches, 2007



Related_18b, C-print, 24 x 36 inches, 2007



Cane, C-print on Di-Bond, 60 x 75 inches, 2009