Love the Road You're On:
57 miles of U.S. Route 322

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Amelia Conte

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Project Board

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Darren Miller, Professor of Art

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George Roland, Professor of Art

Pledge:

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Amelia Conte

Artists Statement

This project is a portrait of U.S. Route 322, specifically a portion spanning from Meadville to Clarion, Pennsylvania. I am exploring the geography that created a cultural landscape, capturing the road that winds through rivers and mountains and scenery that mirrors our past and present. This work is an invitation to viewers to create their own adventure and find and travel their own paths. To perhaps take the winding two-lane road instead of the highway, and let inspiration find them as it found me.

Acknowledgements

Darren: For helping me with countless problems and questions, taking me through printing tutorials and lighting tutorials and for being patient and willing with all of it. Thank you for your insight and suggestions and not hesitating to tell me when you saw problems in my work. I've experienced so much working in the gallery with you and getting to know the artists. I hope I was a good guinea pig comp student for you!

George: For being my advisor for the past three years, pushing me to take certain courses and talking professors into letting me join others. Your solutions to issues with my comp were always so thoughtful, constructive and valuable. Thank you for letting me help you with outside projects in the art department, I've learned so much.

The rest of the Art Department: This corner of the Campus Center has been where I've spent the majority of my four years at Allegheny and I wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you to all of you with whom I've had classes, for sharing your wisdom and teachings. I've loved getting to know this department so well. Thank you to my fellow gallery workers, too, for the many fun/awkward hours we've spent together.

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Katie: Thank you for giving me cat-stractions, fish-stractions, schmate-stractions and of course, kate-stractions. I can't imagine these past four years without you and I don't want to think of where I would be! This has been a tough semester, but we're only stronger and closer because of it. Thank you for your shoulder when I've needed it and reasoning with me when I needed to hear it. I'm so happy you've become a part of my life and always will be. Here's to next semester, captain!

Daisy: For knowing how to comfort without words and always being unconditionally happy and excited to see me.

Lacey: For being on the other end and never too far away.

Leslie: For "screwing around" with me in the art lab. It would have been awful to be in there until the wee hours of the morning by myself. Let's hope for many more nights of coffee and orange Gatorade!

The Campus staff: For your whale noises and dum-dums; I can't think of a better way to spend my Wednesdays. The photojournalism skills I've learned here inevitably found their way to this project. Tanks!

To my faithful Subaru: For getting me through this journey with great gas mileage and keeping me company on the long early drives.

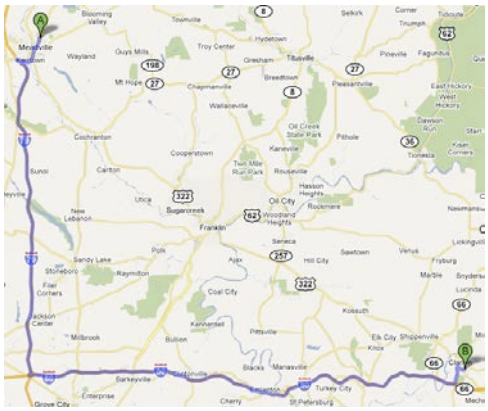
Artists are explorers. We delve into the unknown and come out with a representation of what we've discovered. We are interpreters, liaisons, and exhibitors to the public, creating works that showcase our view of the world. Sometimes, we artists pre-cognize before creating, other times we go on adventures to find new inspiration. It is when we go out into the world to discover inspiration that we also discover things about ourselves. We learn what attracts us to certain places, objects and people. And it is when we realize why we are drawn towards these things, that we can truly make art that reflects our innermost beliefs. My senior comprehensive project came about during an adventure of this kind. I know now that being an artist means always thinking creatively and being open to receiving insight when it comes.

My first idea for a comp came after months of deliberation, careful thinking and brainstorming. I was bouncing many ideas around in my mind, but I knew I wanted photography to be my medium. Would I take photos of light, glass, concentrate on a certain color each week or find manmade paths in nature? I finally decided on a project dealing with the distinction between tourist and artist in photography. I would go out and photograph events from those two different perspectives and find out what creates a distinction between the two. I was satisfied but not entirely excited by the idea, however, it was the beginning of the semester and I needed to start. As I explained my idea to people, I heard myself sound a bit pompous and elitist. After all, who was I to decide what was art? But I figured I could work through that and perhaps artists could understand why I wanted to create this comp.

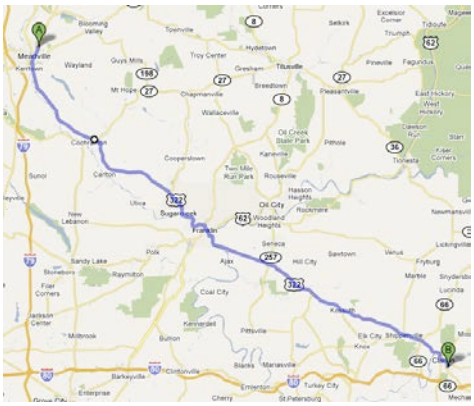
Life is all about choosing one's path. Splits in the road happen frequently in life; some options are clear-cut and easy to choose, others are more challenging with each selection equally weighted. A major split in many people's lives is the passage to college and higher education. For me, it was Allegheny College versus the University of Maryland, liberal arts versus art

school and city versus country. Then while at Allegheny came other decisions; each changed the course of my future and led me to the exact point I am at today. The choice of a comp was another decision in a long line of life decisions. That choice was prompted by another major life event. Was it a fluke or destiny waiting to be grasped?

While going through a rough period personally in September 2009, I realized I needed to get away from Allegheny. I decided to visit one of my friends from high school at Clarion University. There are two ways to get to Clarion from Meadville. I could take the modern, efficient, sterile route – two perpendicular highways -- or I could take U.S. Route 322.



Interstates 79 & 80



U.S. Route 322

Route 322 is 30 miles shorter but the drive takes the same 75 minutes because of the slower speed limit. It was a beautiful day and I wasn't in a rush so I took 322, hoping it would provide more of a distraction and a little adventure into the unknown.

About 10 miles in, after driving quickly past the factories right outside of Meadville, I started seeing family farms, views of rolling hills for miles, old railroad tracks and Jesus signs. I drove by tiny towns, men in the fields with their cows, barn stars on the sides of houses and ancient cemeteries. French Creek and the Allegheny River flowed alongside the winding road,

coming in and out of view. I saw road-kill and RVs, in-season apple sellers and vegetable stands and closed-for-the-season ice cream shops.

Like the cliché, it came to me in an epiphany. I had never had an artists' epiphany before. For most other projects for classes I thought of something as quickly as possible so I could get to work. This was different. This was inspiration as pure as it comes: a photo essay, a portrait of 322. I would document and photograph the road from Meadville to Clarion.

This idea for a comp was clear, focused, objective and contained. There was none of my bias or viewpoints clouding the idea, just art. This was presented to the viewer, for them to come up with their own ideas about the work. My comp project could be about capturing the people, communities, traditions, economy and simple beauty of the landscapes of 322. I was excited, passionate and inspired. I knew then that I had my comp topic revealed and the more I drove along 322 the more certain I became.

U.S. Route 322 is much longer than the part I chose to document. It is a 494-mile long highway that begins in Cleveland, Ohio, crosses through Pennsylvania and ends in Atlantic City, New Jersey. When I realized this I thought, is there a comparison here for my own life? My mother grew up in New Jersey, my father in Pennsylvania, and they met in Ohio. These three states are crucial to my existence and so I found another reason to look closely and study a section of a road that traverses these fateful states.

In Pennsylvania, the road is called the 28th Division Highway, in honor of the 28th Infantry Division, with a shrine located in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, near that stretch of 322. The infantry is a unit of the Army National Guard and is the oldest division-size unit in the armed forces, established in 1879. It continues servicing the country today, having been deployed to Iraq as recently as 2008 (28thinfantry.org). Seeing the infrequent road signs reading "28th

Division Highway" I thought only of older war veterans, not knowing that this division is fighting the "Global War on Terror" we are in right now. I wonder if the trucks I follow down 322, with their "Support our Troops" ribbon stickers know the history of the road they drive upon every day and how the past is mirroring the present.

To situate my comp within the context of photography as art, I needed to get a sense of when photography became a legitimate art form. I looked to Henry Peach Robinson's 1869 book Pictorial Effect in Photography, in which he discusses the basic elements of photography and gives a beginners guide to composing, lighting, framing, balance and portraiture. I found a quote about the intersection of nature, art and photography to be particularly illuminating:

> It has been often alleged that, except in its lowest phases and in its most limited degree, art can have nothing in common with photography, inasmuch as the latter must deal with nature, either in landscape or portraiture, only in its most literal forms; whilst the essential province of art is to deal with nature in the ideal, rendering that which it suggests as well as that which it presents… (Robinson 12)

I believe I can go against the philosophy of this quote. In my work I want my photography to make the literal seem ideal. I am doing little to manipulate my photos, other than heightening the contrast or brightness. It's the content that will seem ideal. Historically, ideal means as close to God as possible and if one looks carefully there are even angels in my photos, yet this is literal, just water in a fountain in Franklin.

My technique for documenting this roadway started out very structured. The first mission was to drive up and down the entire 57-mile stretch, writing down every thing that caught my eye and its mile marker. Every humorous church sign, interesting house, abandoned gas station

and antiques store was noted. I also wrote down where the most gorgeous views were, along with railroad tracks, rivers and ponds. After this trip, I had a long list of spots where I could stop and take out my camera.

However, it did not take long for me to abandon my ‘shopping list” and let my instincts take over. Soon, I pulled over where I saw fit. When I saw a road to the left that looked like it might lead to an interesting place, I turned there and followed it. If I saw an arrow to a gun shop or a homemade sign for a pumpkin patch three miles to the right, I let myself explore these options. Ultimately, it was this acceptance of my intuition that led to some of my strongest photographs. I also made it a point to stop in various towns and walk around, explore by foot, talk to people and see what I could find.

I most often took photos in the mornings, before and just after sunrise. This led to a great light quality and on some mornings, fog, which added a whole other element and feeling to the photos. I made it a point to drive at other times of day as well, to get views at sunset and mid-day, with the countryside at its sunniest. I planned to visit the largest town on my portion of 322, Franklin, during its fall festival –Applefest– to be able to observe and report on the culture and people of this area. I also visited Clarion, the last town on my route for their Autumn Leaf Festival and parade.

Even though I took photos during busy events, when I gathered my favorite photos from the 700 or so I had taken, none of them contained people. I found that human life was absent in my strongest works. I show the impact of human society upon the landscape -- rusting school busses in a pristine meadow, flowers in a landfill -- but the people themselves became an unimportant element to me. At first I was uncomfortable with the fact that my work lacked human subjects, but without people I found that the photos have more of a timeless quality – the

scenes could represent any of the decades through which 322 has endured.

Additionally, in researching various artists I found some with whom I identified in the human-less nature of my work. Jim Dow is an American photographer who documents the seemingly ordinary places where people live out their everyday lives. "My interest in photography centers on its capacity for exact description. . . . I use photography to try to record the manifestations of human ingenuity and spirit still remaining in our country's everyday landscape" (North Dakota Museum of Art).

I examined Dow's book Marking the Land, for which he spent years photographing North Dakota. His project, like mine, is contained to a specific geographic location. "Folk art is also an integral part of the landscape in Dow's visual study, and he examines the subtle evolution of local craftsmanship from homemade sculptures, murals, and carvings to carefully crafted pieces aimed at tourists. Anchoring all of these explorations is the raw and striking landscape of the North Dakota plains" (NDMOA).



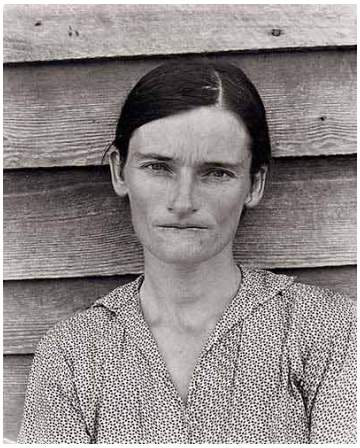
Jim Dow, *Alex Paluck's Shop, Exterior View, Belfield, ND, 2/17/81*. Marking the Land. 2007.

Like my work, Dow's contains few humans, which reinforces its focus on what humans create and the mark they leave upon the land on which they live. In the forward to his book

Laurel Reuter addresses this: “Dow’s photographs are devoid of people. Instead they inhabit the margins, felt but unseen” (Reuter, xiii).

I wanted the marks of a community to be present in my photographs as well, as a celebration of this route and its towns. Reuter describes the way Dow does this by stating that he has come to cherish the places he photographs, which I think could be an accurate way to describe my love of Route 322.

One of Dow’s early influences was photographer Walker Evans and his book *American Photographs* (1938). Dow describes Evans's work as "razor sharp, infinitely detailed, small images of town architecture and people. What stood out was a palpable feeling of loss...pictures that seemingly read like paragraphs, even chapters in one long, complex, rich narrative" (NDMOA). Evans was assigned to photograph for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930’s, work which led to the groundbreaking book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men with writer James Agee. Evan’s photographs produce a stark portrait of the increasingly rampant poverty in southern Alabama by focusing on three tenant families.



Walker Evans, *Allie Burroughs, Hale County, Alabama,* 1936. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men



Walker Evans, *Highway Corner Reedsville, West Virginia.* 1935.

These photos soon became icons of the Depression era of America. However, Evans also took photographs of a different nature. He spent many years documenting places rather than people. In New York City, he was very interested in architecture as well as humanity; he would ride on the subway system with a camera hidden in his coat (getty.edu).

My project perhaps best echoes a Walker photograph, “Highway Corner, Reedsville, West Virginia.” The Getty Museum describes this as a photo where “signs proliferate and dominate, with no visible person to read them…. Despite all the evidence of devices to keep people connected, the image projects an ironic sense of emptiness and desolation” (getty.edu). A photo I took in Shippenville is quite similar to this one; with an eerie lack of cars on what seems like should be a busy intersection.

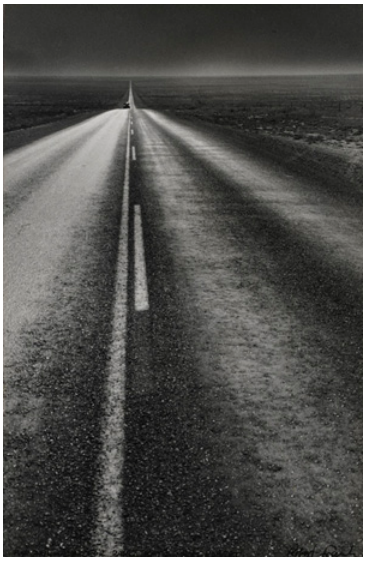


Amelia Conte. *Shippenville*. 2009.

While researching these artists, I became worried that my work was not sending a message. Unlike the work of Evans, who brought to light the poor social conditions in the early part of the century, my work just seemed pretty and pleasant. Did my work need to make a statement to be justified as something more than a decoration? Walker Evans said: "Leaving aside the mysteries

and the inequities of human talent, brains, taste, and reputations, the matter of art in photography may come down to this: it is the capture and projection of the delights of seeing; it is the defining of observation full and felt" (getty.edu). I take from this that art *can* be just about delight and bringing an experience to the viewer. Isn't this one of the most broadly experienced benefits of art, why people have it in their homes and workplaces, to see scenes they cannot personally experience, to add beauty to their lives, to view a new perspective. Yes, art sometimes has a social agenda, but most often, it is there to add grace and excitement to our surroundings.

Another artist with social commentary running throughout his photographs is Robert Frank. A Swiss photographer, he received a grant to travel the United States and document the varied societies he found (Lane). What came of this was The Americans, which communicated the struggle between class and racial separations and the hopefulness of the 1950s. The New York Times writes of The Americans: "Once rejected for its pessimism, now sanctified for its political prescience, the book distills heartache, anger, fear, loneliness and occasional joy into a brew that has changed flavor with time but stayed potent" (Cotter C27).



Robert Frank**,** *U.S. 285, New Mexico*
The Americans



1955 Robert Frank, *Trolley- New Orleans.* 1958
The Americans

His photographs cause reflection and pause, many ideas packed into a single frame. Frank said of his work, "When people look at my pictures I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice" (LIFE). Frank was certainly successful in this aspect, yet as we can see with "U.S. 285, New Mexico", he also took some quieter photos, just showcasing the American landscape, as well as Americans themselves. I also took to heart a quote by photographer Eliott Erwitt on Robert Frank:

> Quality doesn't mean deep blacks and whatever tonal range. That's not quality, that's a kind of quality. The pictures of Robert Frank might strike someone as being sloppy - the tone range isn't right and things like that - but they're far superior to the pictures of Ansel Adams with regard to quality, because the quality of Ansel Adams, if I may say so, is essentially the quality of a postcard. But the quality of Robert Frank is a quality that has something to do with what he's doing, what his mind is. It's not balancing out the sky to the sand and so forth. It's got to do with intention. (Griffiths)

This reassured me that my images should be just as much, if not more so, about the content rather than the technical aspects. It's about intention. Certainly my photos have to be of outstanding quality, so that the content can shine through. But, the technique should be almost invisible; it's not something I want the viewer to focus on when looking at the work. I want them to see the through the image to the place I am exploring, so they can explore too.

Perhaps these photos can be a cause for preservation as well. Just as Ansel Adams helped to create the National Parks so precious to us today, my work can be a call to save the landscapes I have presented. I want to capture nature as it is now; who knows how long it will be before it is

overrun by housing developments and shopping malls? The Hudson River School painted America because it was the only true wilderness left, unlike Europe, where their predecessors had painted portraits and allegorical studies. They wanted to capture the hills and tree-covered mountains, rivers and seas while they could, before it turned into the America we know now (Hapson). In the same way, I'm capturing the landscapes of rural Northwestern Pennsylvania, the essence of small town life, before it disappears into its future. Will the deep blue of the sky be forever turned gray by smog and pollution? Will family farms be run out of business by industrial agriculture? Will climate change alter the photosynthesis of the changing fall leaves? Will Applefest succumb to financial losses and insurance regulations? I feel a need to document this while it still exists, while nature is still present in our fast changing world.

At one point in the semester, my advisor suggested that my photos seemed distant and unconnected. I seemed to keep a distance between the road and myself, careful not to let any of myself influence affect the portrait. I think this happened because I wanted to keep the project pure. However, it led to my advisors not seeing enough of me in the work.

We agreed that I would add short journal entries beneath each of the photos, serving as captions of sorts. But unlike typical art gallery wall captions, these would be stories about what was out of sight of the frame, the person I met directly before I snapped the shot, or what I found on the road shortly after leaving this area. Hopefully, this will imbue the exhibit with more of my personality, and invite the viewer into my road trip experience.

I printed my artwork in a variety of different sizes. This added diversity to the piece and helped me to emphasize certain photos that have a weighted amount of significance. The largest size I printed was on C-sized paper, 17 inches by 22 inches. From there I went down to 11 by 17 and finally the smallest at 8 by 10 inches. The different sizes added angles and lines to keep the

piece interesting and the viewer's eyes moving. I printed the photos that had an extraordinary amount of detail or color on the largest size. "Filler" photos, how I classified the photos that lead the viewer through the work but don't automatically call attention, were printed on the 8 by 10 paper. Having more photos in varying sizes will also help make the gallery wall feel fuller but not boring.

I have also chosen to print on a luster surface paper and mount the images on foam core. Glossy surfaces reflect light a bit too much instead of absorbing it. I feel this does not draw the viewer in as much. The light is bouncing out and shielding the viewer from really getting into the photo. Matte paper would fall too much on the other extreme, absorbing all of the ink without a hint of reflective surface. I want the project to be about photography, not photography pretending to be a painting or drawing.

A final issue I struggled with during the process of my comp was the "pretty-ness" of my photos. My photos could be beautiful, but I did not want them to be screen-saver beautiful, where you see a gorgeous forest path, a beach sunset or a field of daisies. No one will argue that they are not pretty pictures, but can anyone call them artistic photographs?

As we worked through this in comp group meetings, it came to these questions: Why am I afraid of purely beautiful photography? What is it about a majestic landscape that makes me shy away? If a photograph does not have a person in it, is it not meaningful? If a photo does not contain a social message, is it not important? Can photography be simply about showing? Does it have to incorporate telling as well? Can we leave it up to the viewer to extract his own ideas from the work? Does a photograph have to bring about an extreme emotion to be legitimate? Do we have to be shocked, angered, aroused, or depressed by what we see?

I know that Pulitzer Prizes go to hard-hitting news photos, not to those that capture the

fall colors of Northwestern Pennsylvania. I did not want humans in my work and I had accepted that. Now I had to find a way to make the landscapes their own subject and figure out why they are legitimate and meaningful subjects in their own right.

For answers to this I looked to the Hudson River School, 19th century American painters and the first group to develop the landscape genre. Artists like Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, John Frederick Kensett and Frederic Edwin Church were influenced by European Romanticism but wanted to break free of European painting standards, and felt a need to create art that was truly American (Hampson). The results were grand paintings, full of optimism, contemplation and reverence for the beauty of nature. "As Cole and Durand firmly believed, if the American landscape was a new Garden of Eden, then it was they, as artists, who kept the keys of entry" (Hampson). The Hudson River School also believed in nature bringing humans closer to God. "If nature were untouched by the hand of man--as was much of the primeval American landscape in the early 19th century--then man could become more easily acquainted with the hand of God" (Hampson).



Frederic Church, *Morning in the Tropics,* 1877

As beautiful as the paintings were, the School had a difficult time becoming fully recognized by the academy. George Inness, in 1879, said in an interview in the New York Post: “It is true that scene art can never assume to be a representative of the higher forms of mind” (Avery 5). Slowly, but surely however, the public began to catch on to the new ideas forming in art and took to the landscape painters with great fervor. They were being called the first Americans to realize a great truth, that to study nature was important to our culture and development as a society (Avery 12). Thomas Cole defended his genre in 1834:

> Will you allow me here to say a word or two on landscape? It is usual to rank it as a lower branch of the art, below the historical. Why so? Is there a better reason, than that the vanity of man makes him delight most in his own image?
> (Roque 25)

So, as the above painters did, I shall let my work be a conduit between man and nature. I can see now that my photos are beautiful, but they can be beautiful for a purpose. I can induce in my viewers an urge to jump into the frame, to explore that twisting path between the tall trees leading up the hill and ending in a spot of light. It is an invitation to them to create their own adventure and find and travel their own paths. To take the winding two-lane road instead of the highway, and let inspiration find them as it found me.

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