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Storie of the Past: Learning the legacy of Emmet Gowin

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The process of producing a documentary film about the legacy of Emmet Gowin is much like the process, I imagine, of researching and discovering the biographical history of a prominent figure in art. Unlike most documentary films I have made, which largely focus on what is happening presently in the lives of the individuals I am documenting, the Emmet Gowin project has been one fueled by memories of the past. This nostalgic process of reminiscing has created a very unique and unfamiliar opportunity in documentary filmmaking for me, the approach being greatly dependent on stories of the past which in many ways is exactly what Gowin's photographs embody - stories of the past.

Initial research for this project consisted of contacting a lengthy list of former students of Gowin. Several of those students had not gone into an artistic field, did not remember their experience at the Dayton Art Institute, or did not feel they had anything valuable to offer our film project. Occasionally, they would mention a few new names to contact. Our list quickly expanded but our success at finding potential interviewees remained slim. Eventually, after navigating a web of phone calls, being connected and reconnected to new names, we were able to secure a few interviews with former art students of the DAI. An interview with Gowin and his wife and most famous subject, Edith, had not yet been confirmed.

Through interviewing our subjects, we learned about Gowin's unique and hands-on approach to teaching, the way he taught students to print their photographs so they would last 100 years, the way he analyzed his students' work, finding meaning in their images that they perhaps hadn't even considered. There were also recurring statements expressing the particular idiosyncrasies of Gowin,

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phrases like "Emmet had a way about him," or "He had a kind of mysticism." These phrases, we found, came to capture, however obscurely, the essence of a mysterious figure we had only grown to know through photographs and the memories of others. Luckily, half way through the production, Gowin responded to our emails, stating that he was intrigued and interested in our project, though he wasn't sure why considering negative experiences he has had in the past with documentary and media teams.

The next step was to plan our trip to Newtown, Pennsylvania, the small historic town where Emmet and Edith live. I took advantage of the nine-hour drive, pouring myself into articles and essays written by or about Gowin and his work, studying his photos of altered landscapes, drawing comparisons between his body of work from the 60s and 70s and his newer works, like *Edith in Panama*. I felt so nervous upon meeting Gowin for he had warned us of negative experiences he has had with film crews. As a student of both film and film theory, I have developed a hyper awareness of the camera and its sometimes dishonest implications, its abilities to exploit, its abilities to misrepresent. I understood Gowin's hesitancy, but hoped that our genuine interest and curiosity would shine through.

On the phone, Gowin had mentioned we could come over on a Friday morning for coffee and conduct our interview, which he anticipated would take an hour or so. To our pleasant surprise, not only did he and Edith invite us to stay for lunch, but they invited us to return the next day as well. During our interview with Emmet, his "mysticism" was made apparent. His words were full of philosophy, his analysis of work was perceptive and personal, and his passion for art was

undeniably present in his eyes, his gestures, the way he could speak for hours and hours, wandering and questioning the meaning of everything.

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I also had the remarkable opportunity to interview Edith. As a student of Women's Studies and feminism, paired with my background in film, I have developed a particular interest in representations of women in the media, or simply, images of women. Gowin's photographs of Edith reveal a woman of simultaneous strength and beauty, a tomboyish charm with a wild feminine spirit. Images of Edith peeing in a barn, lying naked in a stream with her son, or surreptitiously opening her blouse, revealing her breasts as she stares powerfully into the Gowin's lens; these images embody a complexity, a woman who is not just a model for her husband's pleasure and gain, but an active participant in her image making as she claims and takes ownership of her own subjectivity. Edith did not have much to say about these musings in particular. She did however flip through a book of Gowin's work from the family farm in Virginia, telling us the untold narratives of each photograph, what she remembered, why it was beautiful, reminding us along the way that "Emmet is my favorite photographer." Gowin later told us that Edith has never let film crews interview her before, let alone let them hear such intimate details of her life and her past.

Our time spent with Emmet and Edith Gowin was remarkable, life changing even. And so the long process of editing begins, sifting through hours and hours of footage, finding the small gems, the moments that will tell the history and legacy in the most compelling way. The real challenge of making this documentary is discovering how we, as artists and filmmakers, can creatively tell a story about

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another artist. The piece must be respectful of Gowin's work, must be accurate and cohesive, but should also be a creative work in its own right, something with a unique voice and feel of its own. Going forth, the process of editing is the longest, most tedious, but also the most important part of making the film. In editing, the decisions you make will influence the finished product in the most profound of ways. In editing, we hold a great responsibility to tell a history, to convey a legacy, to create a moving portrait of an artist