

Unanswered: Witness

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The photographic images in *unanswered: witness* are documents of death and of absence, markers of fugitive geography. They are records of sites where random horrific events either were instigated or have taken place.

Landscapes of human trauma are often razed in an attempted erasure of real life horrors. The buildings that do remain standing are evidence of a sublime denial, a denial that stands in the face of absolute knowledge of the incident. In some cases the precise site is purposefully subverted by changes to street names or numbers, as well as demolition of the surrounding neighbourhood. Most of these topographies are unremarkable to unsuspecting passers-by; they have become banal.

In a working class Chicago suburb, a family lives in the same seemingly unremarkable pink townhouse where Richard Speck raped and murdered eight student nurses (1966). In a middle class enclave across town an elderly couple knowingly bought and built a new house on the bulldozed property where John Wayne Gacy raped, tortured and buried young men during a sexually motivated killing spree (1972 – 1978). The house once rented by serial killers Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka in St Catharines, Ontario has been demolished; a new house stands on the lot where Kristen French and Lesley Mahaffey were held hostage

and brutally murdered (1991).

The photographic images contain an intangible focal point. Photographer and viewer alike are engaged in an arm's length conversation with evidence of the unseen - there is no physical body in the foreground to indicate the presence of a subject and yet this is where the lens was intentionally focused. What remains is a liminal space, suggestive of the unknown, of spectrality, erasure, and the fogging of memory.

The superficial beauty of these large-scale colour photographs plays with the viewer's expectations, provoking a physiological as well as a psychological need to bring the image into focus, to grasp for clues. We become doubly blind witnesses, questioning the who, what, when, where, and how of what occurred in each place and to further consider the one question which remains unanswered at every site – why?

BEING: VAGUE

Making the transition to digital technologies was a natural evolution of my interest in the conceptual underpinnings of photography and visual orders represented by focus, motion, exposure, etc. In the digital realm I am equally fascinated by the machine and data itself, i.e. compression, mathematics, algorithms and physical codes that are encountered in tracing physically intangible proof of the existence of an image that exists no-where until the work is made manifest. I have been pursuing and investigating virtual strategies relative to the absent image that exists 'elsewhere' while pursuing margins, borders, horizons and other intangible definitions of psychological and physical space. I am especially interested in the horizon as a

vague, unapproachable yet defined perspectival limit, further obscured by fog, snow, clouds (radioactive and/or atmospheric) or rain. Weather systems have been an intrinsic part of my creative investigations. They relate to vagueness theory, catastrophe theory, and systems of entropy, all of which play a significant role in process.

Several site-specific works I have undertaken since the 'unanswered' work have unfolded into investigations of suicide, drownings, loss and human hazard and yet despite their dense histories and thick atmospheric conditions the visual records are encoded in extremely small digital files. The data contradicts the richness of information being presented: for me this encapsulates the digital paradigm. The evidence of erasure of data in the images that I have recently taken of snowstorms opened my thoughts to the possibility that the residue of *absence itself* can potentially be compressed and reactivated. The strands of this thought are also embodied in a GPS-based work performed in 2008 – the two threads entwined are road maps of a love affair traveling across two continents – my partner and I were separated by obligations to be in different places. He was in Cardiff, Wales, and I was in Crow Head, Newfoundland. Both geographies are bound by landscapes that face the Atlantic Ocean; both are landlocked by inward turning bays and promontories despite being at the edge of a shared body of water. Both of us mapped our journeys from starting point to end point with handheld GPS monitors. The folds in the landscape are laid on top of each other and are positioned with True North in common. The intersection of two lines crossing into a figurative X that is evocative of a recombinant metaphysical DNA was unexpected and would have taken a meticulous cartographer many years to provide a detailed accounting of our whereabouts. Instead the recording of our separation was stitched together with a few simple

commands documenting an impassible terrain across an ocean, the quavering lines are evocative of the uncertainty of two lives held together by longing.

Moving away from analog practice was delayed in many ways by knowing that I would be giving up a hands-on relationship with printing my own large-scale work, a heretofore tactile and essential part of my working process. Instead, I have been delighted by the surprises embedded in this aspect of digital production. Printed off-site via a process that takes basic data and interpolates this existing data into an expanded version of itself effectively removes more than my hand from the resulting works. Interpolation is a technical process that is conceptually layered and deeply provocative. The computer second-guesses the artist by adding data to the file via software. While the image looks similar to what I envisioned when I made the image, it is intriguing to consider that the end print is the result of all of these systems: one cannot be certain these are part of the image as a result of time and motion, or whether they appear as artifacts of technology and the techne involved. Through the constant interaction of digital interfaces my work ultimately is the result of a chain of virtual absences. I have been pursuing ideas and concepts based in this amalgam of nature and technology as signified through mathematical theories, digital paradigms and the never-ending question of an increasingly monitored and surveilled world: who is watching whom?

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