

The Tooth of History

MURMURS OF COLLAPSE
(AND THE POINT OF STILL STANDING)

A text by Sara O'Brien in response to
The Tooth of History
Roger Palmer
18/11/22 - 23/12/22

To fathom words for an image finds correspondence, perhaps, in the act of foraging and fashioning images from a place. As words collate to form a sentence so a set of images forms a sensible structure that conveys something of somewhere. We may be compelled to call this something meaning. As we approach, we draw from wells that precede us. We derive nuance from placement. We press for the pliability of edges and come to understand how things exist in relation to their frame. The frame of a photograph shows itself explicitly to us. But while its edges are obvious and defined, this is what makes them deceptive. For they host not just the slightness but the sleight of surface. Their boundaries can be permeable and porous. Their borders might be thought of as paradoxically immeasurable as the coast. Especially when arranged together. So we seek through lines. Markers. Thoroughfares. Pattern.

There is always as much withheld as there is held in an image. But an installation can act like a valve. It supports release. If another series of Palmer's recent work, which takes the more compact form of a book, is called *A Stone's Throw*, this presentation might be conceived as the body of water into which such a stone might be thrown. The shutter stop the puncturing of the surface of a plain made picture plane. The many circles that emanate from this point of entry the reverberations that pulsate and coincide in the space. As self-contained images they hold their own. En masse, they hold something else.

The shadow of a figure here faces the shadow of a figure there. The image of an image of, there. The image of an image of, here. We see the wear and the worn, the weather and weathering, the residue of former times, the corrosion and eroding of foregone eras. The past, and the many ways in which it comes into contact, points to and portends the future (a future). The present capriciously inserts itself in between as we contemplate what was and what will be, while trying to maintain purchase on the ground beneath our feet. The seasons come back around. We reiterate and return, all a means of making sense. The snow falls again, there and here. And each time we might ask ourselves whether anything has changed at all.

Palmer's images are fragments of a time spent in a place that he assembles, after the fact, into an array that is memory- and mirage-like, simmering for the salience that can be gleaned with distance. Despite its seeming stasis and its appearance as an equivalent to the world it depicts, the photographic image can be as unstable as memory, especially when presented within a thicket of other images and the lattice of associations this ignites. Concepts fill gaps. Ideas might emerge and attach themselves to forms. The photograph is peculiarly these two things at once. It is both the tangibility of matter and the immaterial of the conceptual that it courts. It may only be a sliver but even this thin thing evinces the notion that *ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars*. [1] A vast cradle. Elaborate formations. All bound up in light.

Laced with both the muteness of the landscape and its mutability, these images show the marks and scars, the layers and lingerings that human intervention has imparted and inflicted over years. They are sealed but amenable to seepage. Decay and desolation draw attention to that which is imposing in its persistence. Space, of course, is always intertwined with the durational pressures of temporality. Place is its companion, textured by inhabitation over time. While each of these works is linked to a specific place, the work overall might equally be about how we place ourselves. The camera is the proxy for the artist, an eye that can be a proxy for our own.

There were many more moments than those we see. These are the ones that floated to the top, that congealed into a kind of relief in the form of a series. There are many ways to arrive at such culminations. In making *Schizophrenie*, a work concerned with the impact and aftermath of displacement and migration, the poet Bhanu Kapil threw her manuscript into the garden where it was left to disintegrate under the snowfall of winter. It was from these *fragments* she worked to make her poems, her book. *Fragments still legible on the warped, decayed but curiously rigid pages*. [2] These images are remnants too, charged still by the litany from which they have been sifted and the histories they respond to and dig up.

To commence not knowing, or presuming, where or with what one will end up, this is an approach. It is a means of entering and embarking that is receptive, a willful drifting reminiscent of the psychogeographical *dérive*. These works tell of tracks followed and cultivated. They are and were wanderings. Contingencies. Routes. The artist Ellie Ga is similarly prone to drift. Her 2017 film *Strophe, A Turning* began with her concern with how floating objects have been used to map ocean movements. From this, she arrived at the messages in bottles that are thrown into the sea, led by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's likening of this act to the writing of a poem, which he states should always be written to an unknown reader. From there to the beachcomber who collects these vessels and their messages, Ga then travelled to the Greek island of Symi, whose patron saint is said to receive the messages in bottles thrown by sailors into the sea. There is a monastery dedicated to this saint on the island, where many such messages have historically washed up on the shore. The work ends on the nearby island of Lesbos where, daily, boats filled with migrants are arriving. The messages in the bottles are changed by her encounter with these other vessels, reframed and newly galvanised for her now as a "call to act". A work can fold back on itself and there are manifold ways that its ripples can be felt. Waterways, after all, are loaded places that can pull you in and carry you somewhere else.

Photographs of recognizable places line the walls and I realise that, perhaps, what I have construed elsewhere as atemporal—as somehow time-less or out of time—may simply have been the unfamiliar. It seems understandable to conflate the two, given how each is a mode of disassociation or dislocatedness. Given how recognition can be seductive. For we do not only see in a photograph, we seek something from it too. But that which is visible is not invariably seen and that which is seen is not guaranteed to be legible. Legibility comes later and it requires a lens of a different order than that which puts the picture on the plane.

Palmer's work has been described as fugitive. We see this in the transient moments—billowing steam, the lather and spray of crashing waves—caught in many of the images, which maintain this fugitivity despite the fact of their capture. Many of the images evade neat or comprehensive comprehension. Many escape the strictures of the pleasantly pictorial. They have been intruded upon, disturbed and interrupted, at times as if by a presence from the very place from which they have come. There are moments of too-closeness that pull like the cord that draws a curtain open and shut, that both occludes and reveals. A too-closeness that unsettles the clean and clear transmissions one might expect from the image in a photograph.

It is felt in the blur, the soft gauze that dresses the foreground of the image. Almost spectral. Oneiric. As if adjusting one's eyes after sleep. A scene rushing past, fleeting. Vision bleary, fleein', roiling in *[t]he drunkenness of things being various*. [3] Felt too in the grain of the wall that gets revealed when covered over. A grain that could be a tone, a timbre, like the blur. These images are hospitable to this hazy hum. They shelter the sight of a site and a longing to be sequestered. They harbour the security of being able to see enough, not having to see it all, that sometimes it's okay to be vague and opaque. But it is in this that they stray from expectations and the conventions of what a pleasing or 'proper' image might be. They err and, much like Palmer's process, they inhabit the tenor of errantry as *a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told*. [4] They are wont to diverge. Sometimes tentative. Suggestive yet reticent. They brim at different registers.

The steam and the snow tell us of the weather, the likely temperature of the air. Cold and brittle. Crisp. Stiffened limbs and a faint pink bloom arresting fingers prompting shutters. The white on the ground feels as stark and piercing on the paper, surrounded by other whites, and the dim of the black and the greys. We often think of white—and light—as the opposite of black—and dark. But opposition can be a flawed means of reconciliation between one thing and its seeming counterpart. Carol Mavor turns black over with blue instead. She says, *Black is not the opposite of blue: it is its lining*. [5] She is paraphrasing Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* in which the narrator says, *I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining*. The past, after all, rarely arrives or recedes in straight lines, despite what Progress might want us to think about History and Time. Monochrome can be rose or bleak. Colour can be sepia or bold. But this belies the recurring seam that hides in sky and hints gently at blue.

The line is broken, like the breaks of the lines in a poem. As a sentence, each image a word, it would be an aggregate of phrases and clauses, punctuated by commas, here the breath of the blank wall between clusters. Another line runs below, an undercurrent coursing in counterpoint, that maintains the sequence borne from the series, flecked with the red and the black and the grey, like the iron that runs through veins or the steel of cargo ships. The rhythm stutters and palpitates, disrupting a seamless flow but still holding the pieces together. If it were fabric it would be not patchwork but pockets, maybe folds and pleats, sewn into a well-tailored garment. As a garment, of course, it would be lined. A lining protects and lends softness to the line. It is a threshold that touches both inside and out, that accommodates the in-between. A photograph is always in such a state of betweenness, between the material fact of its objecthood and its conceptual status, between reality and representation. Perhaps one might say then that in a photograph we find how representation is not the opposite of reality, but rather its lining.

These many images might be deemed what Tina Campt calls “quiet” photographs, which *must be attended to by way of the unspoken relations that structure them*. [6] Campt implores us not just to look but to listen to images. Through her work with historically disregarded photographs of black subjects from the relegated archives of the black diaspora, wherein she locates agency and refusal, Campt proposes that some images contain *lower frequencies [that] register as what [she] describe[s] as ‘felt sound’—sound that, like a hum, resonates in and as vibration*. [7] Campt's treatment of the portraits she unearths chimes with Palmer's approach to the places he visits in which he attempts to reveal something else in the overlooked, to garner and generate significance beyond what one might expect to be determinate, defining or immediately disclosed.

Images exceed the banal but refrain from extraordinary. They are quotidian but with the crystalline quality of a quote that stands in for the import of a passage. The incidental becomes furnished with indication. These works are not just to be looked at but provide another means of looking. One might think of them as instances of what Georges Perec calls the *infra-ordinary*, imploring us to *question the habitual...[t]o question what seems so much a matter of course that we've forgotten its origins*. [8] The vastness of place and past is both moored and unmoored in these images. To make them meant finding anchorage amidst the necessary project of letting oneself get lost. Now they are like visual field notes, harbouring the ethos of a certain field guide, which states *it's the world that's stable, yourself that's contingent, that's nothing apart from its surroundings*. [9]

Since ancient times, Anne Carson notes, *pilgrimages have been conducted from place to place, in the belief that a question can travel into an answer as water into thirst*. [10] For Palmer, there is always, crucially, a journey. There is the time of the being there. There are, sometimes, returns. Then there is the afterwards of decisions that do not necessarily equate to solutions but that get things somewhere nonetheless. There may be questions, even kinds of answers, but these sit outside a conceptualisation of images as problems to be solved [11]. Here, they find other ways to hold water.

REFERENCES

- [1] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1998, p.34)
- [2] Bhanu Kapil, *Schizophrene* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2011, p.i)
- [3] Louis MacNeice, 'Snow' in *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967)
- [4] Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997, p.18)
- [5] Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans Soleil and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012, p.15)
- [6] Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017, p.8)
- [7] *Ibid.*, p.7
- [8] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, edited & translated by John Sturrock (London: Penguin Books, 1997, p.210)
- [9] Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005, p.17)
- [10] Anne Carson, 'The Anthropology of Water' in *Plainwater: Essays and Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p.122)
- [11] This is an idea proposed by the photographer Stephen Shore in his talk 'Photography and the Limits of Representation' at AA School of Architecture, 13 October 2010.