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What's Wrong With This Picture?

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After Hurricane Katrina, Robert Polidori went to New Orleans, where he lived years ago, to shoot photographs of the devastation for *The New Yorker*. He stayed longer than first planned, then went back again and again, for weeks, taking hundreds of pictures with a large-format camera that produced wide, superbly detailed color photographs. The camera was awkward to manipulate through the wreckage and in the heat, without electricity and lights. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jeff L. Rosenheim, a photography curator, has selected a couple dozen of these big panoramas and interiors to make a pocket-size lament for a woebegone city.



Robert Polidori

The modern Pompeii: "2732 Orleans Avenue, New Orleans, La., September 2005." a photograph by Robert Polidori is in "New Orleans After the Flood," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"New Orleans After the Flood: Photographs by Robert Polidori," is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, through Dec. 10; (212) 535-7710.

They are unpeopled scenes: New Orleans as our modern Pompeii. Mr. Polidori stood near the corner of Law and Egania Streets where a plain, single-story cottage with a hole in the roof rests beside a telephone pole. A crisscross of power lines forms a shallow X against the empty blue sky. The house, pale green and white, recedes, diagonally.

Except that — the image can take a second to decipher — there are two cottages, one green, one white. During Katrina, the green one, like Dorothy's house, floated clear across Egania Street from who knows where, stopped perpendicular to its neighbor by those electric lines, which acted like ar- restor wires on an aircraft carrier, ripping open the hole in the roof.

If this sounds confusing, that's the nature of chaos, which can be as hard to photograph as it is to describe. Fortunately, Mr. Polidori is a connoisseur of chaos, and the beauty of his pictures — they have a languid, almost underwater beauty — entails locating order in bedlam.

The X of wires and the diagonal thrust of that green house, extending horizontally across the photograph, are vertically anchored by the telephone pole, creating a tranquillity in the composition that belies the actual pandemonium. Given bearings by this geometry, a viewer is set free to find details like the teetering stop sign on the street corner where the green house landed: a black-humored punch line.

All artists, as best they can, make sense of a world that is often senseless. Mr. Polidori's work, from Chernobyl to Havana — in sometimes dangerous, topsy-turvy, out-of-time places — generally bears witness to profound neglect. A photojournalist's compulsion and problem is always to contrive beauty from misery, and it is only human to feel uneasy about admiring pictures like these from New Orleans, whose sumptuousness can be disorienting. But the works also express an archaeologist's aspiration to document plain-spoken truth, and they are without most of the tricks of the trade that photographers exploit to turn victims into objects and pictures of pain into tributes to themselves.

Consider the photograph of 2732 Orleans Avenue: a white house with green stoop next to a pink cottage with white stoop, under cloudy skies. Again, flat geometry, lacking melodrama: order is interrupted only by a white Ford at an angle before the white house, the subtlest of indicators that something's awry, but enough. Stains left by the tide that apparently swept the car off the street clinch the image: they're discreet parallel brown bands stretching across the windshield and the clapboard, adding to the serendipity of compressed abstraction. The photograph meanwhile speaks volumes about life post-Katrina in New Orleans: the traditional shotgun houses, the people in one who cared to paint the shutters green, their neighbors with the air conditioner, the other neighbors who chose pink, what they have all lost and abandoned.

Mr. Polidori shot many photographs of interiors (on the whole less memorable because less emblematic than the exteriors), where soaked ceiling fans droop like wilted daisies and caked mud has turned bedrooms into Martian topographies; each is a voyeur's opportunity to check out the family goods, but also a memorial. The colors ravish. Intractable mold left pox stains in patterns like modernist paintings: at 5526 Chatham Street, on ornamental wallpaper with scenes of Noah's flood, no less.

It's fashionable among some artists today to stage cinematic pictures that look gothic and otherworldly, like Hollywood film stills. Mr. Polidori found real barges lifted onto real embankments, bayous where streets used to be, insulation like rendered whale blubber in giant mounds on sidewalks, S.U.V.'s propped against houses like flying buttresses and bungalows crumpled like balls of paper.

He also photographed signs of recovery: trailers and construction equipment; a few historic homes, stripped to their frames, shorn, on the verge of new life.

These are photographs, in other words, without nostalgia, as Mr. Rosenheim writes in a short introduction to Mr. Polidori's book, "After the Flood," but with "something of the air that generations of anonymous New Orleanians had breathed in and out." They make "no attempt to excavate what went wrong in New Orleans or why the state and federal response remains even today predisposed to cronyism, gross fraud and corruption." They simply testify, as Mr. Rosenheim puts it, "to a city that care forgot."

It's good of the Met to remind us.