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After Katrina

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New Orleans After the Flood: Photographs by Robert Polidori

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After the Flood

by Robert Polidori, with an introduction by Jeff L. Rosenheim
Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 333 pp., \$90.00

Twenty-four chromogenic prints each measuring three by five feet: the exhibition begins with six of them in the Metropolitan's Tisch Galleries, the long upstairs corridor customarily devoted to etchings, drawings, and photographs, and continues, after two left turns, in the modest spaces of the Howard Gilman Gallery. The show concerns the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's ruinous pass over New Orleans on August 29, 2005, as recorded by the distinguished architectural photographer Robert Polidori in four visits between September 2005 and April 2006; it is being attended, to judge from the day this viewer was present, by more youthful African-Americans than usually make their way into the Met.

Katrina, as the disaster is called for short, was a black disaster, exposing the black poverty that, dwelling in the low-lying areas of the metropolis, stayed out of the view of the tourists who flocked to Bourbon Street for a taste of Cajun cuisine and old-fashioned jazz, or who admired the fluted columns and iron lace of the gently moldering Garden District, or who were unthriftyly prepared to *laissez le bon temps rouler* at Mardi Gras or the Super Bowl. Good times were what the city had to sell, trading on its racy past as a Francophone southern port.

Founded in 1718, it flirted from the start with sea level, as the surging Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain hung over its shoulder; like Los Angeles on its fault line, and New York City in its congestion, it borrowed glamour from a hypothetical precariousness. Not merely hypothetical, Katrina proved: 160,000 homes were swamped, and, to quote Jeff L. Rosenheim's succinct introduction to Polidori's massive album *After the Flood*, "street after street, block after block, from Chalmette and New Orleans East to the Lower Ninth Ward, Lakeview, Metairie, and Gentilly (where Polidori lived as a teenager)" added up to "widespread urban ruin" and "community disintegration." Many thousands of the displaced have still not returned; an estimated 200,000 never will. A major American city was depopulated with a suddenness and thoroughness war itself could not surpass.

The event was mostly just news, like tornadoes in Kansas and mudslides near Malibu, to the rest of us; Polidori's big prints take us there with a lofty dispassion and even focus. Eerily, no human beings are present in the photographs, so they have the uncanny stillness of Piranesi carceri, of Richard Estes's glittering cityscapes, of Egyptian tombs unsealed after millennia.¹ The circumstances in which these impassive exposures were made were not studio-ideal; there was no electricity in most of the interiors, and, to quote Rosenheim again:

When Polidori arrived in New Orleans on September 20... , 80% of the city was still under water. The temperature was close to 90° F and the smell of rotting flesh and food was putrid. Downed electric cables draped the streets and sidewalks. Toppled live oaks lay like fallen colossi, except there was no grandeur to the scene, just despair. Most traffic lights and street-lamps had long stopped working, and exhausted relief crews were still discovering and collecting the dead.

But Polidori, with the same devotion that led him to explore the abandoned and radioactive apartments, schoolrooms, hospitals, machinery, and nuclear power facilities around Chernobyl (Zones of Exclusion: Pripyat and Chernobyl²), persisted, employing in some electricity-less interiors film exposures that ran into the minutes. In the haunting Chernobyl book, he wrote in a terse afterword, “I felt personally compelled to confront and witness this ongoing tragedy that no ritual can heal.” In New Orleans, he dealt not with invisible radioactivity but with a city like, he has said in an interview, “a decomposing body”; photographs taken six months after the hurricane still show scant signs of cleanup, reclamation, and recovery.

The first photograph in the show, *Industrial Canal Breach*, Reynes Street, presents, under a powder-blue September sky, water flowing between banks of washed-up lumber, insulation, and overturned automobiles. Automobiles, those stolid American necessities, turn out to be susceptible and rather comically buoyant in a flood; the second photo, *2600 Block of Munster Boulevard*, captures two of them with their rear ends elevated, like a pair of saucy chorus girls, in a row of brick bungalows. In the full tide of Polidori’s 333-page album *After the Flood*, ruined automobiles—upended, overturned, mud-filled, pinched beneath buildings, caught up on fences, buried beneath lumber and sea straw, mashed in mock copulation one against another—are as prominent as fallen trees and skewed ranch houses separated from their cement-block foundations. *2732 Orleans Avenue*, the jacket photo of the album, shows an intact white coupe parked at an angle before an exiguous but apparently unharmed two-family house; the subtle message of the picture, clearer in the blowup at the Met, lies in the horizontal lines of dirt on the car’s chassis, marking the gradual recession of the waters.

Arresting though the outdoors photos are, with their silent testimony to a catastrophe that swept through humble neighborhoods accustomed to being ignored, it is the wrecked, mildewed interiors that take our eye and quicken our anxiety. Would our own dwelling quarters look so pathetic, so obscenely reflective of intimate needs inadequately met, if they were similarly violated and exposed? The third photograph in the Tisch Galleries, *6328 North Miro Street*, brings the viewer shockingly close to a four-poster bed sagging beneath a dark weight of dried and crackled mud; carved pineapples blandly stand watch at the head of the posts, a chunky cabinet of some sort has been tossed by the evaporated flood into a corner, and lace curtains admit daylight between yellow curtains that have bent their valence under a weight of water. *5417 Marigny Street* displays a gruesomely stained and still-soggy-looking orange sofa holding a lamp, TV table, and gaudy throw pillows amid a surrounding clutter that includes a vacuum cleaner, a broom, a baseball cap, a TV set. On the mold-spotted wall a small sign distinctly promotes SOUTHERN COMFORT.

Another enlarged interior, more moderne in its furnishings, *1401 Pressburg Street*, suffers terminal dishevelment for all the aspiration of its crisp blue walls and blue Barcalounger, its boxy sofa and arctic landscape painting, its brass floor-to-ceiling lamp whose three cylindrical shades are wrapped in primary colors, and its little framed text headed DON’T QUIT. Another interior on display, *5000 Cartier Avenue*, might have been a rumpus room or studio, with tangerine walls, a tiled floor, an electric organ, a piano on its back, an exercise bike, a utilitarian oak table, a framed motto of which the word “Bless” is legible; on view are formal photos of three black children, and, most conspicuously, as if propped up by a returning inhabitant, of a young black woman wearing a military uniform, with service ribbons.

For many of us gallery-goers, this is as close as we will ever get to the insides of ordinary African-American homes—their touches of sometimes garish comfort gone, as Mark Twain wrote of the wreck of a raft, “all to smash and scatteration.” First the muddy waters let loose by broken levees invaded these rooms, then the police and military units searching for dead bodies and marooned pets, then Robert Polidori and his voracious camera, and now our fascinated, sociologically prurient gaze. The exhibition and the far greater selection bound into *After the Flood* call to mind two of the tenets of Susan Sontag’s book of essays *On Photography*: “There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera,” and “the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality, and eventually in one’s own.” From this second observation she argued that photography as an art is intrinsically surreal, presenting us with reality not as filtered through the humanity of a painter or word-smith but as captured by an emotionless, thoughtless mechanism, in a moment of time that instantly begins to recede. “What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past, and the concreteness of its intimations about social class.”

The class intimations of these images are plain enough, though Polidori in his exhaustive effort of preservation did not scruple to include upper-end or highland stretches—Canal Street, say, with its two-storied, sometimes stuccoed domiciles set back on lawns, including a pert example of old-fashioned flat-roofed, parallelepiped-pure modernism, with Art Deco stripes and a little penthouse. The occupants of such homes, surely, if they came to New York might not be beyond a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where they would find themselves surreally represented. Even the bleakest of the shelters that caught the photographer’s attention—the single-story shack on Tupelo Street, for instance, a missing wall baring a bright closetful of abandoned clothes; or the wrecked salmon-colored cabin at Law and Tupelo Streets; or the grimly simple bedroom on presciently named Flood Street, with its careening mattress and ceiling fan wilted like a Dali timepiece—hold bits of decorative art and vibrations of life, cut off as suddenly as occupancies at Pompeii.

There are signs that residents of the flood zone sought to defend themselves from oppressive attention. Visible in 1728 Deslondes Street, a neatly lettered sign in the fender of an upside-down sedan proclaims “Tourism HERE is Profane!” At 1498 Filmore Avenue, a game local contractor made a rhyming joke, advertising his willingness to undertake “Tree Cutting and House Gutting.” Polidori’s book has a rough order to it: it progresses from shots of still-present floodwater to the extensive, picturesque property damage inside and out, and then to indications of cleanup climaxed by several shots (6409 Louis XIV Street, 6525 Wuerpel Street, 539 Rocheblave Street) of interiors stripped of plaster and ruined furniture, getting ready to be rebuilt and inhabited, while pristine temporary trailers at last appear, courtesy of a sluggish government.

The photographs of the cleanup stage, however, are among the most dismaying. Heaped onto the street and sidewalk are tons of the flimsy stuff of American housing—fiberglass insulation like poisonous cotton candy; sheets of warped plywood; mock-pine pressed sheathing; pulverized plaster-board; aluminum siding splayed like palm fronds as houses floated and twisted; strips of metal and molding; plastic-covered shelves and countertops; shower curtains and mattresses, downspouts and lawnmowers, air conditioners and refrigerators mired in a state of eternal paralysis. Catastrophe feeds the dump. Short-cut American construction, from wigwams to balloon frames, welcomes the easy transition to trash. The very idea of shelter, our shelter, feels threatened and mocked as we contemplate Polidori’s tireless panorama of automobiles dropped here and there like the playthings of a tired child at the end of the day and of wooden houses that, resting without basements on already saturated soil, took off at the first tug of floodwater.

Polidori, his work makes clear, loves the grave, delicate, and poignant beauty of architecture when the distracting presence of human inhabitants is eliminated from photographs. The bleak utilitarian works of Chernobyl and its associated workers' town of Pripyat, vacated by an explosion of radioactivity, formed an ideally drastic subject, its commemoration self-evidently justified by the admonition the images project, not just to shoddy Soviet management but to all guardians of the nuclear genie.

His *Moods of La Habana*, published in 2003 and accompanied by four CDs of Cuban music,³ shows a pastel Havana emptied of the capitalist wealth that would sustain its elegant buildings. The Cubans, generally smiling and clothed in light tropical style, who are visible amid the moldering, flaking old architecture, seem amiable ghosts, as politically innocent as the bulbous, expansively oversized Fifties models of American cars that are patched up and kept running for lack of alternatives. The message, if any, is muted; the iron grates and graceful archways and fading façades and crumbling Beaux Arts cornices exist in a gentle limbo, an economic miasma suggested by the misty look of photographic reproduction on relatively inexpensive, non-glossy paper.

But *After the Flood* is an opulent volume, brilliantly sharp in its large, ten-by-fourteen-inch reproductions, bound in lavender cloth, and difficult to manipulate anywhere but on a coffee table. It weighs nearly ten pounds and costs \$90; a consumeristic paradox hovers over the existence of so costly a volume portraying the reduction of a mostly poor urban area—"the funky urban environment that gave birth to jazz," a wall legend has it—to a state of desertion and deeper destitution. Who is this book for? Not the flood's victims, who could not afford it. Nor, one suspects, very many well-heeled connoisseurs of fine photography, though there is an abstract beauty in Polidori's close-focus studies of patterns of mold and paint distress, and an occasional Pop humor in the tinselly shoes and glitzy wall decorations the victims left behind them as the floodwaters rose, and a macabre Art Brut in shadowy rooms crowded with cheap furniture as tightly as passengers in a sinking ship.

As it happens, another enigmatically magnificent album of photographs is also on the market these days—*Aftermath*,⁴ by Joel Meyerowitz, an extensive, big-format pictorial record of the cleanup of the World Trade Center site (illustrations from *Aftermath* appear on pages 33 and 34 of this issue). On September 23, 2001, Meyerowitz, wearing his worker's badge, began to photograph the gigantic tangle left behind by the attack on September 11 and the myriad workers who carried out the daunting and dangerous task of clearing the site. Adrian Benepe, the Manhattan Borough commissioner for parks and recreation and the son of a friend of Meyerowitz's, cleared the bureaucratic hurdles balking the photographer's desire to document progress with a large-format wooden view camera. The engineers, policemen, civil servants, and construction men on the site were already, in an age when photographs verify reality, taking surreptitious snapshots. When Meyerowitz, his status still uncertain despite his badge, explained his presence to a group of NYPD Arson and Explosion Squad detectives, one immediately said, "Yeah, we need this history, for our children and our grandchildren."

The formulation is about as good as any we will get. It is for our children and our grandchildren—for the historical record—that Meyerowitz and Polidori zealously labored over many months to capture on film (a phrase the digital camera may soon render archaic) the aftermaths of the two most spectacular disasters on American soil in this young century. This is what it looked like; this is what we don't want to happen again. Since the Brady studio photographed the aftermath of Civil War battles, war has worn a new, less acceptable face. Photography, Sontag pointed out, is naturally drawn to misfortune and the unfortunate; in some cases, such as Jacob Riis's photos of New York slums and Lewis Hine's of child laborers, a public reaction effected some reform. The bourgeoisie must be continually discomfited. If the discomfort that *After the Flood* and *Aftermath* arouse contains an increment of discomfort at the poshness of the volumes and the aura of glamorous selflessness bestowed upon the photographers and their photographic appropriations, the record is indeed enhanced, for posterity to consult, and to use in ways we cannot imagine.