

Cruelty of the storm exposed

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There is a plethora of splendid photography in London to bring to notice at the moment. I was going to report on how, yet again, photography provided the solid scaffolding underpinning all the gaudy froth of the Frieze Art Fair. I want to write on the history show at the Barbican, and half a dozen other shows are jostling for attention. An exhibition of exceptional strength has elbowed all that aside. Robert Polidori's astonishing *After the Flood* at Flowers East is one of the finest sustained series of photographs for years and that very rare thing, a set of pictures in which intellectual doubt and graphical certainty combine to something approaching perfection.

Polidori is a staff photographer on *The New Yorker*, a fine photojournalist who has received World Press Awards and the like in a distinguished career. He is also one of that breed of photo-grapher of whom it makes no sense to say "journalist" rather than "artist". On August 29 2005, the storm surge caused by Hurricane Katrina breached the famous levees in New Orleans in several places, allowing the city to be flooded by the waters of Lake Pontchartrain.

In September, Polidori made the first of his trips to photograph the result. He used a large and heavy camera, committing himself to working slowly. He tried to find order in what he saw, combing steadily and regularly like an archaeologist. Many photographers came back from New Orleans with testimony that there had been a nasty flood. Polidori came back with a deep and lasting interrogation of the nature of American civilisation. That sounds portentous, but it is precisely what Polidori has made. *After the Flood* is an important as well as a very moving collection.

Much of New Orleans is below sea level, and the levees have always been alarming. Put in nutshell, it is not a sensible place to build a city. That in itself is a very American trait: build first and question later. Los Angeles is built on a fault, and has to import water from as far away as the Yukon. We know that once the disaster had struck New Orleans there were questions raised about the preparedness of the authorities, and those questions form the background to *After the Flood*. Katrina was a storm, not an act of terrorism or war, yet we suspect such storms are made worse by man's interference. Quite which elements of the disaster were man-made is not certain. Yet when Polidori started working there the smell of shame and fear and anger must have hung over New Orleans just as heavily as the smell of mildew and rot. Yet he kept a calm head.

Polidori quartered the streets making large-format colour photographs in a recurring pattern: façades straight on, oblique street views, room interiors, details. The pictures are legible (like all great photography) at a range of levels at the same time.

At the superficial level, there is even an element of that curious visual humour that can stick to photographs whatever their subject. The quirky is central to photography, and it is not missing here. The flood was cruel and arbitrary, but there is still a moment of humour in cars apparently parked with their bumpers resting on a house gutter. Humour makes it possible to see things that would otherwise be unbearable, and Polidori knows it well. A boat flung aground in a dry street is always out of place, however it got there. But these are not funny pictures.

In one image a white car is left as if by a careless motorist across a pavement in front of a white weatherboard house. Only after a moment does one see that the horizontal lines on the car are not a photographic mistake, but are the lines of dirty sediment deposited by the receding water, like the rings of scum in a dirty bath. The reference to the very slow layering of geology is in-escapable. There are tide marks in some of these pictures only a foot or two below the ceiling of some rooms. The forces at play in New Orleans went very much too fast for a while.

The motor car is one theme that recurs. Big cars, by European standards, too big for these low streets. So much American mythology is based on that immediate mobility that the car confers. Yet cheap fuel and big cars weren't much help when the streets were water.

Another theme is poverty. Although Polidori photographed in districts rich and poor alike, the water did incredible damage, and it reduced even comfort-able lifestyles to landfill. In the streets, Polidori found many scenes of apparently restricted damage, where the illusion of residential peace survived in spite of a tree on a roof here or a misplaced surface of water there. But once inside the houses, in the savage carnage of possessions ransacked, whether by water or looters or the rescue teams or sometimes the returning owners hastily looking for one or two bits to recover, there is no getting away from poverty. In a society in which one defines oneself by what one is able to buy, abandoned possessions make a telling portrait of the individual. There are no people in these pictures, but their wrecked lives and their lost lives are in every frame.

Some of the photographic culture that all this draws upon is very clear. Polidori adopts the cool style of so much contemporary documentary. His viewpoints carefully eliminate even the impression of the photographer being in motion. So often a dull mannerism, this becomes here an essential part of the pictures. If the photographer wasn't in a rush in this hot, stinking, disease-prone place, he can't want us to hurry. So we can't be looking only at the piles of misplaced stuff or the sinister spray-paint codes of the rescuers telling each other what they'd found. We must look deeper, using the flood to peel back the layers of the society in which it took place. This is a measured calm exploration of the horrific, and it should not be mistaken for just another photographic project where the theme was alluring and the formal approach no more than an excuse to restate it or resell it 50 times.

Polidori's formal rigour is the opposite of an excuse. It is precisely that which allows him to make these pictures about so much more than the damage to the particular streets of a particular southern city. By controlling himself so utterly in the face of the horror, Polidori makes his observations general. Perhaps the US will now forever be After the Flood, in the same way that it is After the Oklahoma Bombings and After 9/11. In Christian terms, after all, we are all postdiluvian.

Polidori may be lucky that the Deep South has such a recognisable visual culture of its own. More than once as I looked at these pictures, images by Walker Evans of other clapboard houses in other stricken areas came to mind. So too did pictures by that great southerner William Eggleston, pioneer of colour photography in suburban streets, who prefigures in a major key much that is here presented in a minor. But there is no luck in making such a beautiful and disturbing series as this.

Polidori found in one house that the plaster had been stripped to the last inch from a lath-and-plaster wall. Among all the big chaos, and among all the moving little personal remains, this one detail seems to me come closest to standing for the whole. The flood flayed some of the skin off America, and it has taken an artist of exceptional control to show us how.