

The physical, hands-on part of my work takes place in the archive. It involves sorting, searching, and seeing. Mentally – and physically – it is fatiguing. Conceptually, the work revolves around the idea of loss...disintegration...and the attendant themes of legacy, inheritance, and inventory. In a phrase: ‘what remains’. Things – often photographic materials – that are overlooked, considered insignificant and/or trivialized play an important role, and presenting them anew is part of what I consider their rehabilitation. Indeed, I have often found that the most compelling images and objects are the ones I (and others) at first dismiss. Sometimes I have the feeling of being sought out by the material, not the other way around; as Ernst Bloch wrote: “We are not born simply to accept or write down what was and how it all was before we were here; rather, everything awaits us, things seek out their own poet and desire to be associated with us.”¹

There is perhaps a curatorial aspect to this, and though it is benevolent, it is not entirely passive. I am an intervening, authorial curator, and my goal is transformation, reconciliation... redemption. Though I do not intrude into existing narratives, I nevertheless make use of them to tell new stories.

I take an interest in how things become connected (and separated again), and this spills over into the organization of my exhibitions. There is often a kind of quasi-genealogical structure to the way the images become associated with each other in the shows and, in a larger sense, as components of my own body of work. Given the fact that I often select materials from family archives, these connections can be quite literal – Baroness Johanna Kotz von Dobrz, who as a sixteen-year-old made the sketches I discovered and re-used for my work *1862*, for instance, was presumably a niece of the missing Prince Auersperg (*le Prince Auersperg*) from the *Ruined Album* series, which emerged from a completely separate source and archive. The works *Library* and *Study* represent, among other things, systems of classification in two successive generations within my own family. Other combinations of images are less literal and more akin to matchmaking on my part to promote ‘intermarriages’ between families; this was the case when I combined images pertaining to the history of Pompeii with objects from my family and other anonymous images in the exhibition *ASH, inc.*, a meditation on ashes in a variety of their forms and meanings. The idea of ‘Pompeii’ bound the seemingly disparate items together as a metaphor for things cataclysmically lost, long buried, later rediscovered, excavated, and put to new uses. As it happens, this also describes the individual trajectories of most of my works.

The independent curator Jasper Sharp recently wrote about my 2010 exhibition *Story Problems* at Josh Lilley Gallery in London: “Many of the works in the exhibition share a concern for exposure: of images that would otherwise be hidden from public view; of instances in which photography, painting and draughtsmanship briefly coincide; of the important role played by the human hand in early photographic technique; and of the development of manipulation from analogue to digital. In confronting preconceptions of boundaries within the medium, Huey’s works reveal as much about photography in times past as they do its position today.”

The following pages represent a brief overview of my solo exhibitions *Full Death; Betsy and I Killed the Bear; Ruined Album; Keep in Safe Place; ASH, inc.; Don’t Say Things; Houseguests; and Story Problems*

¹ My translation. *Wir werden doch nicht nur geboren, um hinzunehmen oder aufzuschreiben, was war und wie es war als wir noch nicht waren, sondern alles wartet auf uns, die Dinge suchen ihren Dichter und wollen auf uns bezogen sein.*



Story Problems

Josh Lilley Gallery, London 2010 (solo exhibition, co-curated by Jasper Sharp)

www.joshlilleygallery.com

A ship sails the ocean. It left Boston with a cargo of wool. It grosses 200 tonnes. It is bound for Le Havre. The mainmast is broken, the cabin boy is on deck, there are 12 passengers aboard, the wind is blowing East-North-East, the clock points to a quarter past three in the afternoon. It is the month of May. How old is the captain?

– GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Story Problems, the début London exhibition of work by American artist Michael Huey, focuses on archival materials – photographs, papers, objects – presented anew as the outcome of the artist’s subtle interventions.

An 1870s watercolour miniature, ruined by spilled wine; a young girl’s sketches of the night sky; an anonymous, enigmatic 1940s Kodachrome slide of a bus driver and three passengers on a beach: seemingly random, these and other images build groups of works whose interior and exterior narratives connect in ways both calculated and complex.

Like snapshots in an album, the ‘stories’ refer back to one another, magnifying each other’s implications. Mysterious, at times foreboding, they hint at majestic forces beyond our grasp.

During the mid-19th century, extrasolar planets – planets, that is, orbiting stars beyond our own sun – became a topic of scientific inquiry. Today, investigating astrophysicists deduce their presence by observing ‘wobbles’ in a star (red and blue shifts in a star’s spectrum as a much smaller planet alternately pulls the star towards and away from us).

Similarly, perhaps, the effect of a kind of gravitational pull within and between the images of *Story Problems* offers commentary on things otherwise too distant and elusive to be discerned.



Houseguests
Galerie Schloss Damtschach 2010 (solo exhibition)
www.damtschach.at

If it is not unusual for people to stay over as houseguests, it is expected that they leave their own homes behind when they visit: other dwellings are seldom invited in.

For *Houseguests* I have chosen a group of images – mostly of 1950s American rooms in a 1760s style – to hang in the 1820s rooms of Schloss Damtschach. Oriented toward European models, the American interiors nevertheless bear a rather awkward relationship to the salon and dining room where they are on display at Damtschach: now no longer themselves rooms, but having become something decorative to hang *in* a room, they are perhaps somewhat ill at ease – houseguests often are – as mere representations of themselves.

Ever younger than Damtschach, the spaces they depict appear nevertheless precociously ‘older’. Now, moreover, they are gone from the world entirely. That they came and went in what was a brief space of time for Damtschach, reminds me a little of the death of a child, and the pictures have something of that sadness, as well as a kind of knowingness, that comes with having passed prematurely.

Houseguests is supplemented by a video in the gallery space that allows a visiting garden, too, to make an appearance. Moving pictures of flowers blooming, water splashing, cells photosynthesizing, life being lived – all more than seventy years ago. The breeze rustling the flowers came and went before the time of the Second World War, as fugitive as a breath exhaled. It is as though time itself has come to Damtschach on *Sommerfrische*.



Don't Say Things

Kunsthalle Wien im MQ, Vienna 2009 (solo exhibition, photo wall + video wall,
curated by Angela Stief)

www.kunsthallewien.at

Text: Angela Stief

I consider my work a kind of collaboration with the past.

– MICHAEL HUEY

The title of Michael Huey's exhibition refers back to an imperative by the 19th century American writer and transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, who once wrote, "Things said for conversation are chalk eggs. Don't say things." *Don't Say Things* now, in turn, provides the title for Huey's most recent looped video work, based on film footage from the 1920s and featuring the artist's great-grandfather as a protagonist with a special trick up his sleeve. The trick, much like Emerson's dictum, operates on the difference between superficial perception and the truth concealed behind it. The video depicts the artist's great-grandfather, Richard K. Huey, in a ceaselessly repeated act of swallowing eggs. The narrative flow is maintained through the specific rhythm of editing, which, in the process, also emphasises the role of the artist as a creator of illusions.

The point of departure that marks Huey's endeavour to come to terms, as an artist, with the past, with his own family history – with the archive and objects found therein – is *The Place of Beginning*, a book about his family, lavishly illustrated with historic pictorial material. Huey shows himself interested in the ways we grapple with loss, decline, oblivion and death. The fragile object, the thing destroyed or shrouded in mystery, is revitalised by him, frequently by means of a process of appropriation, which tends to inscribe itself to a point deeply within his works, as it did, for example, in such colour negatives as *Slaughterman* and *Glass Collection*.

Michael Huey's concern here is with a reinterpretation and a rewriting of history in the Napoleonic sense of a collusive fiction, or, differently put, a conception of history, which, despite its being in the past, treats it as a malleable substance. In addition, he also addresses the identity-constituting and life-determining processes of change, of a reappraisal of the past and the rediscovery of contents that had been buried under the rubble of history. As a result, Michael Huey, who, suitably enough, makes his home in Vienna, displays a marked penchant for pre-existing materials such as family photographs, found objects, old postcards, inventories, and so on, which acquire a fresh interpretation and a renewed level of topicality as they emerge from the process of being worked over by the artist.



ASH, inc.
Song Song, Vienna 2009 (solo exhibition)
www.songsong.at

Poet, Poem, Poetry
Text: Abraham Orden

We know there are a lot of aesthetic circumstances out there in which the critic finds it good to deploy the adjective “poetic” in characterizing an artist’s work, but what results when we aim for an annulment of that most pliant and promiscuous of descriptives in favor of something wieldable and hard-edged, a noun, an idea; what happens if we stop referring to Michael Huey’s *ASH, Inc.* as an art exhibition and start calling it a poem?

Anyone who has had contact with contemporary academic thought will feel the same automatic rejection of the notion that I did at first glance, perceiving a thorny briar or a quicksand sinkhole in the equation of text and image that the notion appears to assume. And yet in assembling an opinion of what Michael Huey *does*, what his work *is*, and what it *gives* us viewers, *poet, poem, poetry* have presented themselves with the self-animated assiduousness of a natural truth. As soon as I stopped demanding a difference between what words are and what images are, and instead focused my attention on what poems are and on what language is, I was able to put myself in agreement with this truth.

ASH, Inc. is not poetic, it is a poem. Now what the poet does is to take the existing language, the regular words that are available to anyone, and like an old alchemist to press them, condense them, expose them to heat, put them into unusual and impractical combinations, looking for an inexplicable (magical) transformation, a sudden density, a sudden heaviness, a sudden gleam: gold! These are just words, but in a poem they have passed over, have reached the other side and now live in a way that is neither terrestrial (daily speech) nor archival (the historical document)—though in their ascension they celebrate their existence as both, and that is essential. Compared to their prosaic brethren, the words in a poem are like angels, of another sphere, and winged, and terribly powerful for their ability to speak directly to the human soul.

ASH, Inc. is not poetic, it’s a poem. It’s the way Huey treats his material that leads me to the notion in the first place. Though the first time I visited his studio I admit I was perplexed. I could see that these pictures had been enlarged and made more vivid and more colorful and somehow cleaner than one expects at their age, but for me they just looked like an old movie that had been touched up for DVD; there was nothing remarkable to it, their technical resurrection. *He expects so much of his pictures*, I remember thinking then, *and what is he doing with them, exactly?* The answer to the question in the second half of that thought, when it came, forced the reconstruction of the first part of it.

The studio space itself gave the clue. We stood in a medium sized white room that had an air of prolonged occupation in spite of its extreme tidiness. The ceilings emanated strong, even light, and the walls were bare but for a single,

shallow shelf running the entire perimeter of the room, like a chair rail, upon which some pictures were balanced. I came to learn that that long, narrow strip is where everything happens; it is Huey's easel, his brush, his palette, his paint, it is the mirror into which he gazes, composing with Morandian fixity the portraits of himself that issue from his sprawling, searching inquiries into the remnants of the past.

The shelf is the nexus in Huey's creation; on it, he balances his photographic reproductions, arranges them, looks at them, rearranges them. And in this the hours begin to pile up. What Huey is at here, what he is *doing, exactly*, is thinking about his pictures, thinking about them an awful lot, we can even say an unnerving amount, meaning that he thinks into the pictures with a concentration that far surpasses what most people could achieve, for Huey attains an intensity of thought before which I am certain most of us would falter, second-guessing ourselves and our purpose.

In this, he is looking and looking and asking and asking. *What do you show, picture, and what do you hide? What do you stand for, and what before? What can you give, and what will you take? What is contained in you? What can be plied out? What can you hold, and how much? What is your limit, where do you fail me?* As I have come to appreciate the substance of this process I have adopted a new phrasing to characterize the artist's working: he doesn't harbor expectations for his pictures like I had thought, he demands of them everything of which he knows them capable. Through hard looking, he has learned the pictures' language, learned to open them to love the way the words of a poem are loved.

If an image is to become one of Huey's artworks, it will be expanded, enhanced, given a scale of life it may never have known in its original context, yes, but it will not be changed, not significantly. It will be processed in a photolab, in other words, so that it becomes a more glorious version of itself, but this processing is but a physical expression of the real processing, deeper but invisible, unspeakable, that it will have come through to enter into the artist's universe: this glaring vis-à-vis confrontation in the studio, propped up on the shelf and laid bare.

This the artist never undertakes with the misdirected ambition of defining the picture's meaning; it is rather a matter of adjudging its capacity to mean. The wattage of the image's significance is simply gauged, simply but accurately. What is defined may be termed the picture's human density. This is a kind of energy; what it speaks is not expressible in words, but it is ascertainable nevertheless. We can see that it is there in the pictures, the unexpected weight, the sudden gleam, finally, because it has been activated in the art work, turned on and channeled along the grooves of possibility that Huey has carved out with the finished event, the poem.

These grooves of possibility exist between the works, inscribed according to their secret mathematic in the workaday tissue of signification that automatically exists between any two images when they are related in space. The grooves are poetry, the means by which the viewer's thoughts are made to rush along from what it matters when a photograph decomposes, to imagining a body entombed in rock, frozen and never to change, to a hand shaping a mountain from sand, to smoke equally thick, to representation when it might be important, to gesture when it is not. Channels such as these, in which agile thought is contained and directed but allowed to sprint openly, will lead by an unexpected turn in the poem into a quiet reservoir, where thinking's leaping babble ceases, begins to pool meditatively, swirling about the notion of ash, widening to fill it as a word and as a substance, occupying their coincidences, their differences, the various purposes to which these have here been put: why one moment can be a hinge for all the rest, or on which the door heaves shut, but is not always either. Gathering mass in this, the thoughts will come to overflow, drop in freefall, run back again along yet more channels carved in the other direction, through sleep, dissolution, death as an idea, history geological, history monumental, history individual, intimations of the bonds they each break.

One is tempted, here, to wonder at the outcome, to try to name into what this watershed drains. An ocean, read as the infinite, suggests itself a suitable image. And it would certainly be tidy. But if there is something infinite at the conclusion it must be more like evaporation, only the return to meaninglessness, the return to a lack of apparent connection between the elements, the matters, that is also the appearance of total connection. A departure from poetry back into life.



Lost + Found

Schloss Hollenburg 2008 (exhibition with Thomas Draschan, curated by Maximilian von Geymüller)

Text: Maximilian von Geymüller

Michael Huey (geb. 1964) lotet in seiner Arbeit zum einen die genuin formalästhetischen Qualitäten der fotografischen Reproduktion aus, zum andern zeigen sich darin Bezüge zur Fotografietheorie. Die in Hollenburg ausgestellten Werke gehen teilweise auf Dia-Positive zurück, die vom Urgroßvater bzw. Großvater des gebürtigen US-Amerikaners Huey in den 1940er und -50er Jahren aufgenommen wurden. Es sind Schnappschüsse und Spontanaufnahmen aus laienhafter Hand, die vom Idyll einer wohlhabenden Familie der amerikanischen Nachkriegsära künden. Durch die immense Vergrößerung dieser Fotografien auf Großbildformat aktiviert und offenbart Huey nicht nur deren immanente malerische Kraft, sondern enthebt sie zugleich deren zeitlichen Spezifik. Die Momentaufnahmen, ursprünglich einem einzigen, gleichsam „eingefrorenen“ Zeitpunkt verpflichtet, lösen sich aus ihrer temporalen Verankerung und geraten zu Bildern von Menschen und Orten, die nur mehr durch modische und technische Details ihren bestimmten Entstehungshintergrund verraten. Auf diese Weise treten die Fotografien in ein eigentümlich kohärentes Verhältnis zum herrschaftlichen Ambiente des Schlosses, das mitunter im Eindruck tatsächlicher Zugehörigkeit gipfelt. Das Foto der *Swimmers* etwa, so scheint es, hätte ebenso gut in den umliegenden Donauauen gemacht werden können – eine transatlantische Verschiebung von Ort und Zeit. Die der Vergrößerung geschuldete malerische Unschärfe der Aufnahmen sowie deren Farbintensität binden diese dennoch zurück an ihren historischen Kontext. Sie verleihen ihnen jedoch weniger den Charakter fotografischer Dokumente als vielmehr denjenigen visueller Desiderate. Es sind Bilder also, die zwar nicht die Sehnsucht nach Konkretem, wohl aber den Wunsch, mit ihnen die Erinnerung an vergangene Tage aufrecht zu erhalten, verkörpern. Andere Arbeiten von Michael Huey, auf denen die leeren Felder von Fotoalbenseiten zu sehen sind, zeigen schließlich die Unerfüllbarkeit dieses Wunsches: den Verlust der Vergangenheit und der Erinnerung daran durch den faktischen Verlust der Einzelfotografie.



Keep in Safe Place
Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York 2007 (solo exhibition)
www.npgallery.com

Lülja's Armchair and *Lülja's Chair* and the other works in "Keep in Safe Place" are all color digital prints produced as negatives. Lülja refers to a dear friend, Anna-Lülja Praun, one of Austria's first women architects, who lived a remarkable life between St. Petersburg, Sofia, and Vienna and died a few years ago in her late 90s. I got to know her during the last decade or so of her life. The chairs in question were designs of hers that she sketched out in wire. I liked the thought that it was possible to 'produce' them posthumously and that it was a way Lülja, or Lüll, as we called her, and I could – even now – collaborate on a project.

At the same time, the chairs in this state are thoroughly changed (in reality, they are a few inches tall) and their lack of innards and soft coverings suggests something skeletal that has to do with a vacancy left by Lüll's death. The 'color' in them is subtle (tones of blue, green, yellow in the white) and because they are mostly black and white it is perhaps not immediately apparent that they are negatives at all – I like the way they seem to be drawings and photographs at the same time.

Shredded is an image that derives from paper – in this particular case, inventory lists – run through a hand shredder. The apparatus in question is one of the items I inherited from my paternal grandfather, and *Shredded's* aura of secrecy, and mute subtext of the destruction of knowledge before it passes into the hands of someone else, is a kind of memorial to a lifetime's dynamic of opaque interaction with others. It is about the rhythms of destruction and the mystery created by the fragmented remains of something that has been intentionally torn up to prevent its being shared.

Safety Deposit likewise evokes the mysteriousness of the locked safe, the sealed document, the eternal silence of the grave. The key without the lockbox is not unlike the lockbox without the key: with the guarded content inaccessible, both are reduced to their own objecthood, even as they project a kind of afterimage of the 'missing partner'. The blocked potential of that missing partner opens the way to a different dimension of evocative, though ineffable, narrative.

Storage Facility and *House Under Wraps* deal with the accumulation of objects – in the former case, inherited items put into storage, in the latter case, those same objects placed in a summer home shut up for the winter. The ghostly shrouds in each seem to indicate varying degrees of detachment from an individual: while *House Under Wraps* seems to beg the question of 'when' the owner will return, *Storage Facility* turns that question into an 'if', as in William Maxwell's maxim "The odds are on objects".



Ruined Album
Blumen, Vienna 2007 (solo exhibition)

The “ruined album” of the title refers to a photograph album from the period around 1870 – an album that existed, up until a most recent date, as an intact document. Bound with heavily-embossed dark-green leather, its interior revealed 160 cartouches for as many *carte de visite* photographs, all of them identified in a handsome cursive script: *Le prince Auersperg; La princesse Gisele; La comtesse Attems*, which, like *Ruined Album* itself, became the titles for the works in the show. Sadly, everything that was once brought together here was quite literally torn apart again in our age for the purpose of selling the images one by one. The emptied album remained, like a vacant seashell on the shore, as a kind of deserted receptacle.

Systems for the collection of people and things interest me, as do their limits: the moment of tension when a system breakdown makes itself manifest and those same people and things are ‘de-accessioned’ again. In this way time softly inhales and exhales; these processes are its outward signs of life.



Betsy and I Killed the Bear
Charim Galerie, Vienna 2007 (solo exhibition)
www.charimgalerie.at

I work with archival materials – photos, papers, objects – to make them visible, through minimal interventions, to others. I am attracted by flaws and motivated by the idea of making something that is damaged complete again, in a new way. Much of my work concerns itself with legacies: what is given, what is withheld, what is taken. I like to look for traces of other people’s lives in cast-away or unappreciated things, and I consider my work a kind of collaboration with the past.

If, in using found 19th and 20th century images, I pull foreign things closer, when using my own images I tend to push familiar things – through a kind of estrangement – farther away from myself. And so in each case the pictures exist in limbo: the found images de-contextualized and forced to assert themselves in unfamiliar environs; my own images (often objects and spaces from my personal history) inverted and opened to a broad, still, meditative inner space far removed from daily life. The use of negatives – in some cases second and third generation negatives (negatives, that is, of negatives) – introduces legacy back into the work a second and third time, illustrating the inversions that take place over the passage of time and creating “families” of images that inherit traits from their ancestors.

In “Betsy and I Killed the Bear” I concentrate almost entirely on found images from my own family, as taken from my grandfather’s and great-grandfather’s 35 mm Kodachrome and Ektachrome transparencies from the 1940s and 1950s and newly-presented through an analog process (with the single exception of the piece “Living Room”, which is a digital print). To me, these pictures represent a damaged legacy that I have knowingly taken on; through my acceptance of that legacy’s weaknesses, and through my own efforts, I transform it into something of different value. Writing about my work, French art historian Sylvain Bellenger describes its “transposition of phantoms and history into an atemporal, slightly unsettling, poetic and strange universe.”

I know these people in similar situations; I know these places. My knowledge of these scenes, however, is both weirdly specific and surprisingly imprecise; now I, myself, have become so inextricably connected to the images that they are

like bizarre, impossible representations of my own life and memories. They seem deeply familiar, but also slightly foggy, like things I'd nearly forgotten. So my objectives here are twofold: to revel in this fictitious "memory" (to find my presence in it, as it were), and also to expand the fiction to accommodate unrelated viewers in an indefinite narrative. I didn't "take" the slides originally, but I did "take" them later – both physical acts that involve being in a certain place at a certain moment and being prepared to see and connect to something. Without me they would not exist.

"Betsy and I Killed the Bear" is an expression whose meaning has been lost. Like many of the things I work with, it is an evocative archaeological find whose significance is not immediately discernable. Its meaning – as nearly as I am able to reconstruct it – has to do with taking credit for something one has not done. But this meaning has become so obscure that it remains more or less a private one to the individuals in the photographs, in particular to my Aunt Dorothy, who used it in a conversation a few years ago; now 91, and languishing in a sanatorium, she will take it, along with the whole apparatus of her understandings of these events and places, with her to her grave.

Latent Images: Knowledge and Self-Knowledge in the Art of Michael Huey

Text: J.S. Marcus

To be alive means to leave traces....

– WALTER BENJAMIN

1.

The photographic slide is a fossil and a seed: an inanimate, living thing. A souvenir of the age before our own, a "transparency" opaque to the unaided eye, the slide responds to gestures small and large. Hold it up to a lamp, and wait for a glimpse to appear; project it onto a wall and turn a family vacation into a Muybridge experiment. History only moves in one direction, and the history of photography is marked by annihilation, by the replacement, in metronomic rhythm, of one process by another: of uses and users overtaking and forgetting what came just before. The Kodachrome color slide – first used by journalists, adopted by snapshot-takers and now the preserve of artists and archivists – is pre-digital photography's bout with permanence. The color doesn't fade, was made to last centuries.

The history of the slide mocks the history of the camera. An early household appliance, the American Kodak camera of the 1880s was a contemporary of the electric light, with a slogan that would serve as a motto for a mechanizing millennium: "Just push the button, and we do the rest." The early French photographers had metaphysics on their minds; their American successors had identities to construct and consume. After being hauled into the drawing room, the camera conquered the public square. In 1902, the New York Times, complaining about crowds of photographers trying to take pictures of public figures, inveighed against "Kodakers lying in wait".

With the snapshot and the color slide, family members could become stars in their own right, a private version of a public figure, and consciousness itself became photographic. "I could read my non-existence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her," wrote Roland Barthes about snapshots of his mother. Barthes' autobiographical sketch, *Camera Lucida*, is an intimate theory of photography.

The family photograph – with its ghostly density of resemblances and differences, living proof that the dead look like the living, and that individuals seldom resemble themselves – makes history run counter-clockwise. Time, it turns out, is a photographic negative, waiting to be developed, looked at.

2.

In the digital age, the photographic image expands and contracts, turning, with finality, words into images, and the image itself into a hermetic formula. Art, as always, is ahead and behind, and the digital photograph retains certain pantheistic properties. "The photograph," wrote Aaron Scharf, in the 1960s, "is now, along with art and nature, a permanent source of art." Decades and processes later, the photograph, which is sublimely digital, may now be art's primary source.

As genre scenes replaced history painting, so the photograph has replaced drawing; the snapshot has run roughshod with the sketchbook. The American artist Michael Huey uses photographic images the way other artists once used paint – as the most malleable medium. Like Gerhard Richter's painting of photographs, or Thomas Ruff's photographs of paintings, Huey's work goads with mimetic prowess, suggesting something like the photograph of a photograph, of photography transcendent. In his series "Betsy and I Killed the Bear" (2004-2007) family slides from the 1940s and '50s have an inaugural completeness, but also lie in wait, like Kodakers. Huey turns the photographic process on itself: by transferring and enlarging an image off a slide, then applying a Plexiglas surface, Huey scatters and reconvenes, leaves his trace in the form of painterly possibilities, as light and shadow conspire to suggest paint strokes.

The photocollagists of the last century, like the mixed media artists of our own, are composers after the fact, finding cacophony in visual juxtapositions. Huey, a profoundly visual artist, finds fractures and fissures, a temporal complexity, in a single image, renders “failed” snapshots into successful works of art, creating what could be called a collage of one.

3.

An extended family at the northwestern edge of lower Michigan: a cartographic and psychological frontier. The titles and subjects have a mortal innocence, a trap-door simplicity. Dorothy, Del, living room. Huey — an expatriate and homegrown archivist, with the patience, and impatience, of a collector — stops short of the cinematic. His series suggests not motion, but abstracted stasis, framed reveries. Based for many years in Vienna, Huey seems to have absorbed the central tension of Viennese life, which disallows frivolity while encouraging the frivolous. With an eye for both decorative detail and historical pathos, Huey draws the viewer into a circle of hidden loyalties and doomed pleasantries. We are aware of some harshness just outside the frame, of a prairie rococo.

The series title is a permanent riddle, a homily issued by a homespun sphinx. “Betsy and I Killed the Bear,” says Huey. “Like the things I work with, it is a kind of archaeological find.” A family saying, that spread to some other families, perhaps, or finally to his own, the phrase refers to the uncovering of deceit. “Someone, called ‘A,’ does something worthy of praise,” Huey explains. Someone called ‘B’ insinuates that he deserves the credit. Then someone — let us say, my Aunt Dorothy — notices the whole turn of events, and turns to my grandmother and says, with a knowing look: Betsy and I killed the bear.”

Distinctions are made and blurred, secrets exposed and recoded; lives reupholstered. In these works, outside shots have layers, like interiors, while interior shots seem to be composite rooms, or indoor landscapes, with abrupt or angular vanishing points.

By documenting reality, the snapshot undermines what it shows. Huey’s work speeds up what could be called photography’s natural process. His world is beguilingly, heartbreakingly, unmistakably unreal. In “Aunt Dorothy” (no. 1), Huey’s great-aunt has paused in front of an idyllic, mid-twentieth century house, which suggests a stage set, or perhaps a *trompe l’oeil* house. Dorothy herself is clutching a purse that suggests a lapdog, or a file. She is wearing a fashionable hat that suggests a religious order, or even a punishment, a gay shackle. Her look is both blank and knowing. What does she think of the world around her? Is she a pious believer? A sly heretic? A doll? A sorceress? She inspires a reciprocal fantasy, a duplicity: we dream with her, in our own time.

Baudelaire first noticed the prism of middle-class interiors. “Who does not dream of the ideal house,” he asked. “Of a dream-house, a house of dreams?”

4.

The journalist’s interrogatives: who, where, what, why. The title of the series suggests answers to three of those questions, leaving the last one blank. Someone is trying to tell us something, like the four figures in “Swimmers”, who have joined together in some accidental or determined way, forming a smudged letter on the blue-black surface of their “great” lake. They are vacationers, apparently, caught as a negative of a Franz Kline pictograph.

Huey is drawn to the idea of the found object, and the promise of rescue. Duchamp’s readymades were a cackle and a rebuke, instruments of condemnation: the institutions of art were being tried and sentenced. Huey’s “found” slides create a mini-panorama, an intimate epic, in which the family itself is a kind of readymade.

Faces half-recur, sunny scenes illumine nothing: relationships are attenuated, assumed, hidden. In “Aunt Dorothy” (no. 2), Dorothy now looks like a sister, or a simulacrum: connected somehow, but not exactly, with the woman in the bonnet. The young man in “Dad” reappears in “Overbrook North”, looking like an older cousin, perhaps, or a double, not necessarily himself. In “Watching”, a bright, blurred image of two women contains a stark shadow, like a crack or a scrawl. The women themselves are paired and contrasting, opposites as well as doubles, mock shadows. Interrogatives can veer off into expletives, mysteries compound. “Watching” seems to have been taken by someone in midair, adding the amateur’s own interrogative, how.

5.

A family in its prime, in a world on the brink of disappearing: an American mid-century. In “Rosemarie de Paris”, Huey’s grandmother pauses in front of a patriotic window display. We have seen her before in “Aspen” as a militant vacationer, holding up a pair of skis alertly, like a pitchfork or a rifle. She is heroic, sky-high, American neo-Gothic, in a red hat that suggests a plumed helmet. Her solitariness recurs in “Rosemarie de Paris” as a diminishment. A window shopper in the shadows, she has lost all trace of her distinctive red, which has been taken over, or back, by the store and its contents. She is blue and white, bloodless, like a dulled American flag.

For Siegfried Giedion, the Napoleonic empire is derivative and demanding; the model for all modern empires, it is essentially parodic, decorated with symbols ransacked from the whole of human history, which for the first time, and forever after, looks like a catalogue of images. In the American empire, too, decoration is a form of militarization; the present must stand at attention. In "Frontenac", the family, at some stage of a vacation, assembles underneath a grandiose airplane. The fuselage has a postwar timelessness, like a missile silo. The family itself is lined up according to age, to rank. Huey's grandmother, presiding, lonely at the top, shimmers in her white coat, suggesting snow and steel. Red recurs, parodies, as the child's doll's suit. In "Betsy and I Killed the Bear", colors are like faces: they recur and resemble, haunt, are flexible symbols. A similar, luminescent blue suggests expansion and containment, blue skies and blue walls. Fixed colors of a Kodachrome slide are surreptitiously transformed, transfigured, "slide" themselves. Huey's colors anticipate something later, are presciently psychedelic.

Fixed colors suggest color breaking down. The 1940s and '50s suggest the 1960s and '70s: America at its exact peak suggests an America in decline, downward, everywhere at once, in Muybridgean motion. "Each epoch not only dreams the next," writes Walter Benjamin, "but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself..."

"Dad" is an image on the brink, close to its opposite, innocence and its inversion. The hand on the hip; the pink hose, low to the ground; as posed as a Mapplethorpe.

6.

Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is a book-length sketch for another book at once more detached and more intimate, solely about photographs of the author's mother. For Barthes the photograph was always autobiographical, everyone else a version of oneself, and the photograph a kind of mirror.

Photography is born into a world of sublime self-involvement, takes hold on the new boulevards and in the redecorated salons of the Paris of the Second Empire. An inventory of Second Empire marvels would include photography, urbanity, Baudelaire's "lonely" crowds; recognizably modern amusements, and modern boredom; the serious dandy; the serious stroller as casual observer, taking pictures with the mind, the flaneur.

In Huey's mid-20th century Middle West, figures suggest an establishing loneliness, a precipice, partial apprehension, a display-world half in shadow. On the tarmacs and pavements, curbs and driveways, at play, in transit, the figures of "Betsy and I Killed the Bear" recall their Parisian forbears, as Huey's work recalls photography's origins and manifestations: an American flaneurie.

7.

The trace and the aura. "The trace is an appearance of nearness," wrote Benjamin, with the Second Empire flaneur in mind. "The aura is an appearance of distance. In the trace we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us."

The photographic exposure remains a mystery, involves an intermittent, invisible state, which early photographers called the "latent image". The phrase has a Second Empire authenticity: the latent image is a trace that registers as an aura.

To look at the past is to look death in the face, to feel its closeness, and its ineffability. In "Betsy and I Killed the Bear", Huey is living the life before he was born, and his work suggests the ache of a solitary consciousness, an empire of one. Like the Parisian dandy getting dressed, Huey calibrates, and this calibration, this ache, is what is real. Looking at these pieces, we can feel Huey finding himself in his family, as he turns his family into art.



Full Death

Galerie Lisa Ruyter, Vienna 2005 (solo exhibition)

Galerie Lisa Ruyter is pleased to present “Full Death”, an exhibition of photographic works by Michael Huey, whose artistic practice is evolved from painting, genealogical studies, art historical research, and collecting photographs.

“Artifacts are robust: on the one hand, they usually outlive us. On the other hand, they are fragile, and not just physically: they are open to manipulation and have no way of defending themselves (except by outliving the manipulator and waiting around for the next, possibly fairer, interpreter). I have always been intensely passionate about justice (*Gerechtigkeit*), and I tend to want to apply it to the past, as well.”

– MICHAEL HUEY

Michael Huey re-photographs historical documents and, in particular, photographs from the second half of the 19th century. In looking at his own family, he identifies the 1860s and '70s as the time period where the tangible and intangible become irresolvable. It is also one of many points in Huey's work where nostalgia, fetish, and death become interchangeable stylistic flourishes. The identities of relatives and strangers become confused with the identities imposed by the decorative, scientific and stylistic processes of the image-making of different eras.

For Michael Huey, the highly reflective surface of the currently trendy Diasec technique calls to mind Daguerreotypes and the wet-collodion photographic process of the era of his primary fixation. With diasec, a reflection is impossible to avoid, the viewer is included in the image through the same channels of distancing. Michael Huey's other techniques include scale, meta-narrative implications, cropping and coincidence.

Michael Huey considers his appropriation to be related to the act of photography itself – related to the act of using a camera to 'take' a picture. By recovering nearly-lost artifacts of moments in time, sometimes with identifiable origins in family members or 19th-century photo studios, Michael Huey's work begins to tackle the bigger subjects of personal history, authorship, ownership, inheritance, legacy, and justice.

This is Michael Huey's first solo exhibition. He was born in 1964 in Traverse City, Michigan and has lived and worked in Vienna since 1989.