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.

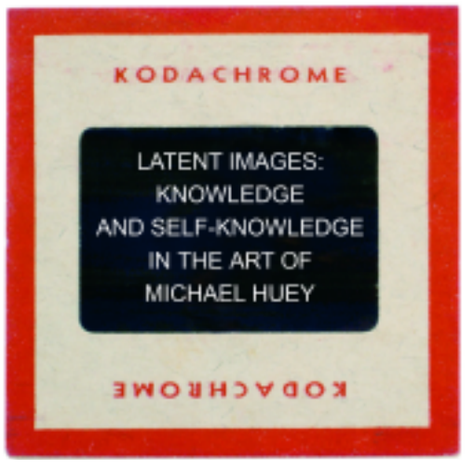
If, in using found 19th and 20th century images, I pull foreign things closer, when using my own images I tend to push familiar things – through a kind of estrangement – farther away from myself. And so in each case the pictures exist in a time limbo: the found images de-contextualized and forced to 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 fragilities, 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 mentioned it to me in 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.

Michael Huey
Vienna, February 2007



by 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 counterclockwise. 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.