

Michael Huey

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The hands-on part of my work takes place in the attic. It involves sorting, searching, and seeing. Mentally—often physically—it requires stamina. Conceptually, the work revolves around ideas of loss and legacy...destruction and disintegration...family history and the archive. Broadly speaking: memory. 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 others (and I myself) 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

Though I seldom intrude into existing narratives, I 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 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 contain a few representative images of my work, an artist bio, and an overview of selected exhibitions and installations.

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.*

I.



Ancestor 2008

Based on a damaged 1870s watercolor miniature on ivory

C-print, Diasec-mounted on Dibond and framed

130 x 90 cm

Edition of five (+2 A.P.)

Exhibited at *Lost + Found*, Schloss Hollenburg 2008

Exhibited at *ASH, inc.*, Song Song, Vienna 2009

Exhibited at *Story Problems*, Josh Lilley Gallery, London 2010

II.



Clouds (Letter) 2021 (studio view)
Archival inkjet print on watercolor paper, mounted on Dibond and framed
65 x 85 cm
Edition of five (+2 A.P.)

III.



Color Block 2021 (installation view)
Painted wood construction, *La Revue du Louvre* magazines from 1957-1974
Executed by Nikolaus Fuchs
Unique work

Exhibited at *Piggyback*, Galerie Reinthaler 2023

IV.



Installation view of *all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know* 2015 (installation view)
Evolving wall painting—iteration, erasure, excavation—at the solo show of the same title
Georg Kargl/Permanent, curated by Muntean/Rosenblum
4 m high

all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know is an artistic reflection on a literary one, a revival of thought processes developed in John Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and, as such, a contemporary meditation on memory and forgetting.

The process of representing an artwork rendered in one medium by an artwork rendered in another is known as *ekphrasis*; Keats' poem is a frequently cited example of this formal device, which simultaneously references, recalls, memorializes, and heightens. Through his lyrical description of and musings about the painted urn of his title, he translates and dramatically amplifies the message and meanings of that object.

In a similar way, the installation itself revisits Keats' word-sketch of the urn, addressing his lines afresh not through further narrative, but through visual art all over again.

Housed in the Georg Kargl project space 'Permanent' as though in a glass-fronted cabinet, the 4 m high silhouette—a 'painted' classical urn—heightens, both literally and figuratively, the meanings of Keats' literary one and its archaic predecessor, even as it takes liberties with these forbears. The result—one might call it 'ekphrasis reloaded'—relies on the viewer's memory of Keats' poem, just as Keats' poem requires the reader's memory of ancient art.

all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know—the title is a fragment from Keats' verse, which concludes with his controversial statement on beauty—builds a complex chain of things remembered and things forgotten. Through the pairing of mutually referential negative and positive silhouettes within the installation (one in the display window, one in the space), a kind of memory forms in real time in the mind of the viewer: simply put, he sees one vase as a negative shape and, when confronted with a second as a positive, actively recalls the first and seeks to reconcile the two, just as the reader of Keats' poem must reconcile the 'real' vase with the described one. At the same time, the intentionally plain, starkly graphic silhouettes themselves seem to have 'forgotten' the supposedly immortal scenes adorning the original urn to which the poet refers; the viewer, meanwhile, may summon them up once again in his mind, projecting them onto these blank prototypical outlines.

Apart from these mental memory exercises, the large wall painting undergoes, over the duration of the show, a real-life course of physical erasure and re-instatement. As in the famous parlor game, each rendition will achieve gains while at the same time sustaining losses. Through this process the artist seeks to provide a visual, archaeological-based commentary on descentance.

The Sisyphean task of re-visiting the past again and again lies at the core of Michael Huey's work and drives its related recurring themes of lineage and legacy; damage and loss; the archive, the inventory, and most specifically, the *China Cupboard*, which became the subject of an extended series and the title of a 2011 solo show in New York. It begs questions of authorship and of the urgent connection, in his work, between the author and the artist.

V.



Big Diary no. 1 (1958-1963) 2017 (installation view)

Pages of the desk diary of Robert C. Hull, Jr. from the late 1950s and early 1960s, MDF core

175 x 150 x 150 cm

Unique work

Big Diary (no. 1) shown as part of an installation for *Absolute Duration* at the decrepit palace of the Marquês de Pombal/Carpe Diem Arte e Pesquisa, Lisbon 2017

SOLO, TANDEM, and TRIO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Piggyback/Huckepack* with Florian Naehrer, Galerie Reinthaler, Vienna
2022 *Ghost Stories*, Schikanedergasse 2, Vienna
2019 *Labor Bestiarium Wunderkammer*, with Thomas Feuerstein + Yvonne Roeb, curated by Vitus Weh, NOW/Esterházy Contemporary
2017 *Family Tree*, Galerie Reinthaler, Vienna
2017 *Boy's Room*, Galerie Reinthaler/die Vitrine, Vienna
2017 *Absolute Duration*, with Miguel Branco + Wolfgang Wirth at Carpe Diem Arte e Pesquisa in Palácio Pombal, Lisbon
2017 *A Place in the East*, with Miguel Branco + Wolfgang Wirth at João Esteves de Oliveira Galeria Arte Moderna e Contemporânea, Lisbon
2015 *Proof*, Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna
2015 *all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know*, Georg Kargl/Permanent, Vienna
2014 *The Darling of Decay*, Galerie Reinthaler, Vienna
2012 *Archivaria*, Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna
2011 *China Cupboard*, Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York
2010 *Houseguests*, Galerie Schloss Damschach
2010 *Story Problems*, Josh Lilley Gallery, London, co-curated by Jasper Sharp
2009 *Don't Say Things*, Kunsthalle Vienna (MQ) photo wall + video wall, curated by Angela Stief
2009 *ASH, inc.*, Song Song, Vienna
2007 *Keep in Safe Place*, Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York
2007 *Ruined Album*, Blumen, Vienna
2007 *Betsy and I Killed the Bear*, Charim Galerie, Vienna
2005 *Full Death*, Galerie Lisa Ruyter, Vienna

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

- 2020 *RBG*, Galerie Reinthaler, Vienna
2018 *Curator's Desktop*, curated by Ruth Horak at Anzenberger Gallery, Vienna
2018 *Uncanny Valley*, organized by Francis Ruyter at Vin Vin, Vienna
2017 *Cities, like dreams, Swamps where cedars grow*, The Provincial, Kaleva, Michigan
2015 *Display of the Centuries—Frederick Kiesler and Contemporary Art*, Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, curated by Peter Bogner
2013 *This Just in*, Mead Art Museum, Amherst, Massachusetts
2013 *Hohe Dosis. Recherchen zum Fotografischen heute*, Fotohof, Salzburg
2013 *Family Matters*, Hamish Morrison Galerie, Berlin
2013 *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection*, Cleveland Museum of Art
2013 *Almanac*, Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York
2012 *Tag- und Nachtbilder*, Museum der Moderne, Salzburg
2011 *Stuff*, online exhibition at Paddle8, curated/presented by Vince Aletti
2011 *Natura Morte*, Pobeda Gallery, Red October Chocolate Factory, Moscow
2010 *Gifted*, Josh Lilley Gallery, London, curated by Ben Street
2009 *Forschungsbericht*, CoCo, Vienna, curated by Severin Dünser and Christian Kobald
2009 *The Red Thread*, Galerie Dana Charkasi, Vienna, curated by Julie Ryan
2008 *In-Visible Spaces*, Galleria Ugo Ferranti, Rome
2008 *Lost + Found*, Schloss Hollenburg, two-man show curated by Maximilian von Geymüller
2006 *Drawing Room*, Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York
2006 *The Image is Gone*, Galerie Lisa Ruyter, Vienna
2004 *The Rose Garden Without Thorns*, Galerie Lisa Ruyter, Vienna

ARTIST BOOKS and RELATED PUBLISHING and HONORS

- 2014 Invitation to join the Vienna Secession
2023 (forthcoming) *Improbable Adventurer*, Album Verlag, Vienna
2021 *Inside Stories*, Album Verlag, Vienna
2015 *Proof*, Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna
2013 *Straight as the Pine, Sturdy as the Oak*, Schlebrügge.Editor, Vienna
2012 *Archivaria*, Schlebrügge.Editor, Vienna
2011 *China Cupboard/Houseguests*, texts by Philipp Blom and Jennie Hirsh, Schlebrügge.Editor, Vienna
2011 *Dearie—The Louis Betts Portrait of Harriet King Huey*, Schlebrügge.Editor, Vienna
2009 *ASH, inc.*, texts by Abraham Orden and Jasper Sharp, Schlebrügge.Editor, Vienna
2007 *Betsy and I Killed the Bear*, text by J.S. Marcus, Schlebrügge.Editor, Vienna

Overview of exhibitions

The following 31 pages represent an 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; Story Problems; China Cupboard; Archivaria; The Darling of Decay; all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know; Proof; Boy's Room; Family Tree;* and *Ghost Stories* together with a few selected group shows—of particular note *Piggyback/Huckepack, Labor Bestiarium Wunderkammer,* and *Absolute Duration,* where in each case my work was crucial in setting the tone for the space



Piggyback/Huckepack

Galerie Reinthaler, Vienna 2023 (tandem, with Florian Nährer)

www.agnesreinthaler.com

Text: Victor Cos Ortega

Lozenges of unequal size divide the picture surface between them. Unevenly sized—and unevenly angled, compressed, stretched, distorted and tilted. Not true diamonds, then. Nor true order either, and yet each piece fits in with its neighbours. Sometimes narrow wedges flash up in between, as if the structure were imposed by the object, not by the painter, Florian Nährer. The paint covers the canvas as a fragmented unit. Its encroachment on the frame explodes the unity of the picture surface and underpins the unity of the work.

But lozenges will not fill up a rectangular space. Necessarily, spandrels remain. Do Nährer's paintings emerge from the center or the edges? The answer: from the center. From the center a structure unfurls, is built up, is constructed out of itself. Summand follows summand, but the whole is more than the sum of the parts, and each part carries the whole as condition and possibility. A yellow carries violet, a pink turquoise, an orange brown.

Somewhere in the gaps between the borders of two colors, these infra-thin spaces, or in the suddenly opening depths of a color field, pictures grow out of the compositions. Or rather: along the path light takes from the surface to the eye, through the brain and into the heart.

An old chair, more stool than armchair, and a second (smaller) one set on top of it. The two are extremely similar. The same cross struts, the same seat, the same curved supports. True archetypes of a down-to-earth sort. Michael Huey stumbled across the larger one on the street, where it appeared suddenly, like a lost memory.

The chairs remain what they were, simple tavern-style chairs, utilitarian objects—supports for people, you could say: prostheses. They were used and they still show the traces of their use. They bear witness to their treatment, sometimes mistreatment. Layers of paint cover one another, breaking and cracking; a few struts are missing altogether. A pink pedestal gives the pair a new place in the world. No longer simply what they were, they are now what they are: forgotten no longer and no longer just a predicate. Brought into a new order.

A second complex of Michael Huey's works originates in photographs of people, anonymous people. One work shows two views of a naked man on a rocky shore, behind him the vast lake in a haze. The archaic pathos is broken by oscillating strips that shake the threshold of the illusionary space. The image becomes vulnerable. The original human being, first split in two by the camera and transformed into an image, then kept and cared for as an object, is now finally reproduced and rewritten. Person becomes object becomes projection. Here, too, the mode of being shows itself at once as primordial original, as predicate, as plural, as type, and once again as singular extension.

Double and triple natures, as inherent to the paintings: their being as image is also a being as object, their being as whole is being as part. In addition to this: the combination of bright and muted colors, of full and grey tones, flat surfaces, and sloping spatiality. The balance of two incomparable quantities like color and form, or artist and artist, lies in proportions, not absolute values. The equality here is a geometrical one more than an arithmetical one. Piggybacking makes one out of two, yet each part remains its own: *Piggyback* with Michael Huey and Florian Nährer at Galerie Reinthaler.



Ghost Stories

Schikanedergasse 2, Vienna 2022 (solo installation)

We encounter certain objects like apparitions: they quietly appear with their enigmatic messages and recede again, leaving us to wonder at their meanings. Sometimes these startling envoys persist with their concerns of absence, presence, and things suspended in between.

The subtle narrative of that latter space is particularly haunting. As Henri Matisse famously said, “I don’t paint things. I only paint the difference between things.” Artists have always been attentive toward negative space.

In my work I return over and over again to the questions of the archive, slipping into a realm of flux between our contemporary world and the past. Blessed (or cursed) with a receptivity toward—and a ceaseless need to revisit and commune with—these ghost stories, am I, in the end, the wandering spirit that cannot find its rest?



Labor Bestiarium Wunderkammer

NOW/Esterházy Contemporary, Schloss Esterházy, Eisenstadt 2019 (trio,
curated by Vitus Weh)

Zeitgenössische Interpretationen der barocken Kunstkammer auf Burg Forchtenstein
www.esterhazy-now.at/information

This show, curated by Vitus Weh for NOW/Esterházy Contemporary in Schloss Esterházy, Eisenstadt, was a rumination on the Renaissance concept of the *Wunderkammer* in general, and, specifically, the *Wunderkammer* belonging to the Esterházy family at Burg Forchtenstein. Michael Huey's part in the collaborative (three artists were invited to participate in the show) was the development of a framework for the display of his own framed photographic images, akin to Renaissance and Baroque ornamental wall systems: this forced the autonomous works into unifying spatial structures to which they were obliged to subordinate themselves. The color fields Huey designed and installed covered an area in total nearly 20m in length and some 5m in height. Each of the circular fields was an abstract "world" unto itself—reminiscent of early maps and globes, these plain color zones each contained a particular body of work addressing issues inherent to collecting and archiving: the family tree; the fragility yet simultaneous steadfastness of inventory; the decomposition/disintegration/migration of the material world. In between the twin fields on the main wall two 18th-century console tables from the Esterházy collection were fused into a kind of abstract hourglass figure that referenced, in a quiet way, the ticking of the clock.



Family Tree

Galerie Reinthaler, Vienna 2017 (solo)

www.agnesreinthaler.com

The family tree figures large as a *Gestalt* in Michael Huey's work, in which he draws upon his family archive and its seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of primary source materials in grappling with questions of loss and legacy. The archive, however, is simply his *Mont Sainte-Victoire*: the place to which he returns again and again, a place his intellect rubs up against, a place that activates his conceptual thought. Huey doesn't live in the past, but the past is where he works; in that sense he commutes daily to and fro.

In securing, cataloging, and caring for a large amount of data on his ancestors' lives he might be seen as playing the role of the estate manager or small-town magistrate of an imaginary, ever-growing city of the dead. In his investigations the notion of what constitutes the archive is ever-expanding.

The actual forests of his childhood; a veritable forest of information; roots gnarled and damaged and roots freshly-established; the "leaves" of thousands upon thousands of pages of paper in filing cabinets: nature—the tree—offers itself up as a symbol, a metaphor, an inspiration, and a model organizing principle both in Huey's genealogical work and in his work as an artist.



Boy's Room

Galerie Reinthaler/die Vitrine, Vienna 2017 (solo)

www.agnesreinthaler.com

For the installation *Boy's Room* the single framed work *Damaged Boy* (2014) is shown against the backdrop of a custom wallpaper that, in turn, is based on a series of contact prints from the period around 1920. (The contact prints are further images of the “damaged boy”.) The window vitrine of an old storefront adjacent to the Galerie Reinthaler is used as a space to display—symbolically, at least—a so-called “boy’s room”, the room of the boy in question; at the same time it is meant to appear as if it were made up of elements of the boy himself. The mise-en-scène lures the viewer into a seemingly familiar world that reveals itself to be a place of estrangement.



Absolute Duration

Carpe Diem Arte e Pesquisa in Palácio Pombal, Lisbon 2017 (collaborative; space shown above solo)

Absolute Duration—the title comes from Sigmund Freud’s essay *On Transience*—is a collaborative exhibition project between Miguel Branco (PT), Michael Huey (USA), and Wolfgang Wirth (AT), conceived for *Carpe Diem Arte e Pesquisa* and taking place in five rooms of the Palácio Pombal in Lisbon.

In responding to the enfilade, each artist has created/selected work that aligns with the very particular present state and condition of the exhibition space(s): the result is a web of interventions that—taken together with the rooms themselves—functions overall as an interconnected, kaleidoscopic installation.

The fragmentary grandeur of the palace speaks not only to art history generally and to a specific architectural/cultural historical past, but—with its array of damaged walls and ceilings, missing tilework, exposed structural elements, and random wallpaper remnants—also addresses something like the space’s own partially-revealed memory.

Given the particulars of the site, the visitor finds himself on shaky ground, confronted by untenable conditions, spatial dysfunctionality, and decay. It is a profoundly unsettling, multi-layered experience....

The artists’ approach is an attempt (well understood to be doomed to failure) to ameliorate these circumstances and fix these flaws through a provisory process of ‘refurbishment’ of the spaces: to offer up rooms once again positing themselves as furnished spaces—in theory—even as they remain utterly, preposterously uninhabitable. Missing socle zones are covered by mirrors, a room is wallpapered over, pictures are hung, furnishings and objects brought in. None of these measures, in the end, fully mask the signals of dysfunction; on the contrary, they heighten and underscore them.

By moving into the ground floor rooms of the *Carpe Diem* Foundation at Palácio Pombal, art sets temporary parameters for itself in which it can feel at home, knowing, nevertheless, that *Absolute Duration* is unattainable.



Proof

Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna 2015 (solo)
www.kiesler.org

In their preoccupation with issues of ambiguity and incontrovertibility; natural language and the language of symbols; deductive thinking and lineage, the concerns of *Proof* echo those of certain arithmetic exercises. My aim has been, in the manner of a mathematical proof (i.e. reliant on a structure assembled from what is self-evident and established), to lay out a defining, true, and universal (artistic) statement about the unknowable, the mysterious, and the abstract. In geometry, a proof's completion is often denoted by the initials Q.E.D.—*quod erat demonstrandum* (“what was to be demonstrated”)—or, alternately, sometimes marked, like the end of a life, by what is referred to as a ‘tombstone.’

The artifacts and relics I generally work with, on the other hand, are denoted and completed—laid to rest, as it were—by corresponding artworks-cum-reliquaries and installations (or, not infrequently, by [artist] books). On occasion, an installation might itself literally *be* a tombstone, or a group of them, as in the 2007 granite work *Be A Nice Person (for J.H.)*, permanently located in the Cleveland Township Cemetery near the so-called Bohemian Settlement by Maple City, Michigan, not far from my own North American birthplace. Or it might instead simply involve cemetery soil, like the ongoing experiment *Growing*, whose components are earth collected from family gravesites; clay pots; *calendula* seeds; and a watering can.

Cemeteries are one place to store a life's evidence; archives are another. *Proof* zeros in on the discrepancy between what can be documented through archival records and objects, what can be (falsely?) interpreted, and what can—despite all best efforts—simply no longer be evinced. What news, what clarifications can be drawn from material(s) at hand? What remains immanent to the source but nevertheless trapped within, not extractable? As in a dream sequence, the archivist-artist seems to be in a constant clinch, ever encountering locks without keys, and keys without locks.

A new series of *Proof* images based on photographers' proofs surviving in the family files, together with around a dozen objects—some presented as *objets trouvés*, others reworked as artist objects—make up an elegaic *Kunstkammer* of the archive at the Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Foundation. *Proof* is at once a repository for things real, for the memories attached to those real things, and for projections onto those things and those memories. It is thus an equivalent triangle, constructed methodically, with precision, out of paper, dust, tree rings, blood, empty spaces, and strange forms of nourishment and sustenance.



all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know
 Georg Kargl/Permanent, Vienna 2015 (solo)
www.georgkargl.com

All ye know on earth, and all ye need to know is an artistic reflection on a literary one, a revival of thought processes developed in John Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and, as such, a contemporary meditation on memory and forgetting.

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All ye know on earth, and all ye need to know—the title is a fragment from Keats' verse, which concludes with his controversial statement on beauty—builds a complex chain of things remembered and things forgotten. Through the pairing of mutually referential negative and positive silhouettes within the installation, a kind of memory forms in real time in the mind of the viewer: simply put, he sees one vase as a negative shape and, when confronted with a second as a positive, actively recalls the first and seeks to reconcile the two, just as the reader of Keats' poem must reconcile the 'real' vase with the described one. At the same time, the intentionally plain, starkly graphic silhouettes themselves seem to have 'forgotten' the supposedly immortal scenes adorning the original urn to which the poet refers; the viewer, meanwhile, may summon them up once again in his mind, projecting them onto these blank prototypical outlines.

Apart from these mental memory exercises, the large wall painting will undergo, over the duration of the show, a real-life course of physical erasure and re-instatement. As in the famous parlor game, each rendition will achieve gains while at the same time sustaining losses. Through this process the artist seeks to provide a visual, archaeological-based commentary on descendance.

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Display of the Centuries—Frederick Kiesler and Contemporary Art
Austrian Cultural Forum, New York 2015 (group)
www.acfny.org

Psyche 2015

Assemblage of 25 laboratory flasks with stoppers, beeswax seals, and paper labels; table with adapted top
91 x 105 x 105 cm

Paleo-climatological investigations of prehistoric atmospheric evidence trapped in glacial ice, fossils, and sediments serve as the jumping-off point for the work *Psyche*. Each of the twenty-five laboratory flasks contains the breath of a single person from the artist's circle of family and friends, sealed with a glass stopper and beeswax. The vital force—thus captured and corked, though indistinguishable (visually) from one sample to the next—invites viewers to consider questions of permanence, individuality, and memory.

Nearly a hundred years ago, in the context of his other ready-mades, Duchamp's 1919 *Air de Paris* posited that the artist could transform sheer air—virtually nothingness—into art. Though perhaps a descendant of this idea, the emphasis of *Psyche*, given the artist's commitment to and preoccupation with archival issues (and the general acceptance of Duchamp's premise), lies much more on the isolation and composition of the substance per se. Its chief concern is personal: what we leave behind, and how we as individuals alter our atmosphere. That many of the contributing participants are themselves artists turns the Duchampian idea on its head; in these cases, the 'found' object is not of anonymous origin, but quite literally, and in the deepest sense, an artist-made substance.



The Darling of Decay
Galerie Reinthaler, Vienna 2014 (solo)
www.agnesreinthaler.com

Photographs lead autonomous lives fully separate from the lives of those they document: for, in their pre-digital form, at least, they are part of the world of objects. And in this stubborn object-hood they frequently outlive their own content.

Though far less robust than the human actors who populate them, they are nevertheless strangely enduring masters of survival. Seldom do they escape entirely unscathed, however, even if the damage only comes in the form of scratches, tears, or fingerprints. Occasionally it is more grave. In this way, they slowly become protagonists in their own dramas, telling their own stories and recounting their own ordeals.

As with humans, their changes often transpire on the inside. Dependent upon individual circumstances, their chemical composition dictates constant processes of decomposition and metamorphosis, something that plays into the hand of the American artist Michael Huey, whose topics include loss, legacy, and the archive.

His solo exhibition *The Darling of Decay*—the title comes from a text by Eric Crozier for a Benjamin Britten cantata—presents a kind of gallery of decline, a visual cantata with soloists whose voices together create a common narrative about transience, layering, and memory.



The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection
 Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland 2013 (group)
www.clevelandart.org

Text: Jon Seydl

Michael Huey has focused on the layering of meaning in photography. He often works with preexisting images, carefully selecting and examining his source material. In a process he describes as “archival,” Huey seeks out images and objects—often insignificant—and, following a period of intense observation, re-presents them, in the process revealing something in the original work that is not normally visible.

In 2009, Huey published *Pompeii* with a timeline outlining the stages involved in its creation, from the initial wall painting in Pompeii to the present work of art.

1. ‘Original’ Fourth Style mural painted in a Pompeian villa, ca. A.D. 64
2. Villa buried under ash and debris about fifteen years later
3. Pompeii rediscovered in mid-18th century; excavated through mid-19th
4. Mural re-drawn from surviving fragments and completed, likely as a pattern
5. Mural reconstruction photographed by Giorgio Sommer around 1870
6. Photograph colorized by Sommer or a contemporary studio assistant
7. Colorized photograph included in a souvenir album on Pompeii
8. Chemical and physical deterioration of image over the following 135 years
9. Album image re-photographed with Sinar p2 negative format mechanical camera
10. Analog production of Pompeii in wall-sized format, with Diasec surface

The enormous scale and saturated palette both suggest the use of digital photography, but Huey created the work with analog processes. His confounding technique, as well as his multivalent use and reuse of source materials obscures questions of authorship, even implying a collaboration with the makers, known and unknown, of the source works. In this way, Huey questions the ability of photography to convey meaning, while opening up “glimpses toward something ambiguous and not entirely knowable” (Huey, 35).

Pompeii stems in part from an album by Giorgio Sommer, the most prominent nineteenth-century topographical and documentary photographer of the buried cities, an artist who himself reflected deeply on disaster and remembrance (...). The Sommer photo adapted by Huey depicts a painting of Hercules with a woman and child from the House of Queen Caroline (...). While this fresco was excavated in the early nineteenth century, it was

lost in only a few decades, owing both to its exposure to the elements and a destructive practice used by nineteenth-century guides in which wall paintings were dampened to saturate their colors, inevitably leading to abrasion. The original image, as well as Huey's layered processes, draws attention to the idea of loss through the vulnerability and precariousness of photography. As Huey himself stated: "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."



Archivaria

Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna 2012 (solo)

www.freud-museum.at

A cycle of works—the offspring of source materials as wide-ranging as a 1930s inventory album; a 1940s Kodachrome transparency from an ice-fishing expedition; a contemporary paper shredder with its enigmatic contents intact; an eighty-year-old biscuit miraculously preserved in wax paper; and recaptured vintage 1950s film material—reveals connections as unexpected in formal terms as they are in their array of possible meanings. As in color experiments where the perception of a single hue changes dramatically through its placement near other tones (known as the *Bezold Effect*), these works, brought into proximity with each other and these rooms, alter each other's reception: they influence, explain, and complete one another. At their core are the twinned rhythms of creation and destruction, that of memory and that of forgetting. Together they lead the visitor through a landscape of loss and redemption at once austere, inscrutable, and strangely inviting.



China Cupboard

Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York 2011 (solo)

Newman Popiashvili Gallery is pleased to present *China Cupboard*, the second solo exhibition of Michael Huey at the gallery. The exhibition includes images from *China Cupboard*, a photography series developed over the past decade.

The artist concentrates on themes of loss, legacy, and inventory by reviving found historical photographs and family snapshots, and re-evaluating heirlooms as raw material. Now, extending the practice of working from pre-existing images, Huey goes on to investigate “photography-ready scenes”—landscape views of cupboards and vitrines. He documents personal histories through objects that are at once precious, banal, and private; vistas usually hidden from public view become exposed.

The series captures the readymade nature of extant arrangements of various everyday objects. The familiar takes on a ghost-like shimmering quality through an alteration of color values: Huey reverses, but stops short of assigning, the colors of his photographs.

The serial nature of his work conjures up the Bechers, continuously searching out and photographing water towers, and its visual mystery reminds one of Vera Lutter’s camera obscura photographs and their monochrome radiance. Forswearing the austere, Huey composes his painterly images on the intangible border between the recognizable and the concealed.

Vince Aletti on *China Cupboard* in *The New Yorker*, *Goings on About Town*, February 14, 2011:

Huey’s eerily beautiful photographs of dishes, glasses, and figurines in china cupboards recall two of the medium’s earliest images—William Henry Fox Talbot’s “Articles of China” and “Articles of Glass”, made in the eighteen-forties. Like those pictures, Huey’s are elegant, seemingly straightforward studies of pottery and glassware displayed on shelves, domestic inventories full of clues about taste, wealth, and class. But these pictures have a very peculiar palette—at once washed out and heightened, the result of reversing the color values of the image. The effect is shimmering and seductive: crockery goes to Heaven.



Gifted

Josh Lilley Gallery, London 2010 (group, curated by Ben Street)
www.joshlilleygallery.com

Text: Ben Street

Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. Do something else to it.
– Jasper Johns

Gifted takes the premise of the seasonally popular tradition of the Secret Santa to create a self-reflexive and playful assessment of the gallery and its roster. Secret Santa is a way of unifying colleagues in a workplace by obliging them to buy each other Christmas presents with a particular price limitation. The recipient of your gift is randomly assigned, resulting in varying degrees of delight, relief, or anxiety for both parties. The preparation for this show has taken the same approach, with the geographically disparate gallery artists made to play office colleagues participating in a game of seasonal gifting. Each artist was asked to submit one work of art to be randomly assigned to another. Everyone gave, everyone received. These gifted works were then altered to whatever extent the recipient wished. Some have undergone only minor changes or none at all taking the inspiration of the received work as a gift in itself. Others have been transformed almost beyond recognition. In the final stage of the process, ownership of the work has passed to the recipient. As with all the best parlour games, the absurdity of the premise allows for a relaxation of formalities and the revelation of unexpected patterns, kinships and meanings.

A roster of gallery artists creates a kind of virtual community of individuals, united under common approaches and attitudes. Yet that community (like that of the art world as a whole, as well as online communities) is just that: virtual. Divided by geography, these individuals are being asked to think and operate as a corporate body. This exhibition is a way of thinking about the communities in which we all, in some way, participate. Each work in *Gifted* is a token of a real interaction between constituents of a nebulous community.

A gift is a small impingement into your world by another person. It's something they've left in your life. Its strangeness, the way it doesn't quite sit with the rest of your stuff, is a reminder of the strangeness of other people, their weird tastes and unusual smells. Making a received gift palatable to you means changing it to suit your world, just as accepting a new friend into your life requires a bit of amiable attrition. That alteration might be tiny (wearing your own smell into a new shirt) or large (dyeing that shirt bright blue). The works shown in this exhibition are a reminder of how objects passed between people accrue a provenance that transforms them into things of unexpected power. It's through apparently minor personal interactions — playing games, giving gifts — that new meanings and ideas suddenly make themselves known.



Story Problems

Josh Lilley Gallery, London 2010 (solo, 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)

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, 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)
www.songsong.at

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 (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)

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)

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)
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, "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)

www.galerielisaruyter.com (see Exhibitions/Galerie Ruyter – 2003-2006)

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.