

Dreamscapes in Nathalie Daoust's "Entre Quatre Murs"

In 1859, Charles Baudelaire declared photography to be "art's most mortal enemy" because he feared that the camera would replace the artist and reshape cultural memory.¹ The renowned art critic and poet preferred the mirrored surfaces of Parisian windows to the imitated landscapes in photographs. Baudelaire turned to art in order to escape the confines of his city. Nathalie Daoust's project "Entre Quatre Murs" plays with this desire in contemporary Berlin and demonstrates how photography is a form of imagined travel. Her thirty black and white shadow boxes of Berlin interiors offer a window into dream worlds.

Daoust shot mainly in the eastern parts of Berlin, where deserted buildings form a graveyard of past memories and economic betrayals. The complexities of imagined common histories are placed in tension with produced private existences. Most women in the photographs were strangers to Berlin - a city which still bears the marks of past ideological deadlocks and whose scars remain as bullet holes on the exterior walls of pre-WWII architecture. She utilizes orthochromatic photography to capture these multiple intersections. In the darkroom, the printing process entails "reassembling, superimposing and reconstructing" pictures from several shots. The finality of photography is interrupted through the intrusive aspects of this method. The framed pictures are carefully collaged, three-dimensional compositions in which disparate moments are brought together in a single image.

The shadow boxes preserve various memorabilia of interiors and moments, subjects engaged in daily living or dispersed objects which hint at a whimsical life. Individual stories enliven the coldness of decomposing walls. Daoust thereby suggests an impending arrival, transformation or departure – encountering bodies on their way to an imaginary sphere. The

¹ Charles Baudelaire, "Salon of 1859" *The Mirror of Art*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1956), 230.

photographs capture unbound movements, intense gazes and playful situations and denote an intimacy among subject, artist and viewer. The picture “Bird” depicts a woman glancing sideways, in her bedroom, with distorted birds flying in a half-moon pattern, hinting at the eternal child’s nocturnal sheep-counting. Another shadow box displays a disproportionately large head positioned near the ceiling of the room. The sun framing her eyes and the clouds surrounding her face allude to the metaphor of having one’s head in the clouds. A different illustration shows a pair of legs ascending from the room. The only remaining clues are the separating walls, the lonely light bulb and the portrait of a ship leaving the harbour. Thoughts of travel, adventure and the unknown create a visual familiarity. In stark contrast, the image of a nude, transparent, seemingly blindfolded woman with her hands raised as if she is tied up to the wall is haunting and beckons a second look.

Daoust dismantles the expected by destabilizing territorial relations and inducing fantasies that echo through the interiors. In privileging the stable physical presence of the rooms, her perspective mediates the transitory life of her subjects, both as squatters in these constructs and as strangers in Berlin. Various realms of permanence invite the viewer to go beyond these four walls in exploring the fragmented and isolated existences exposed within them. A woman sitting next to a large window looks at the viewer. She seems to derive her fantasies from the realities of the outside world.

The prevalence of glass surfaces in picture frames, windows and doors likewise expands the space of the artwork beyond the materiality of the art object. We, as onlookers, become an additional layer of the images as we attempt to look out of the window from the middle of the room. For Baudelaire, “What we can see in the sunlight is always less interesting than what goes on behind the panes of a window. In that dark or luminous hollow, life lives, life dreams, life

suffers.”² In other words, it is we who are caught in the reflections. Windowpanes act as thresholds to reveal ephemeral instances. While our gaze is fixed on the female bodies, we fail to realize that the glass surfaces are reflecting our desires. The women erase temporal and spatial affinities but lure us with their shadows. Daoust illuminates a transformation of dreams encroaching upon reality. She captures the moment of passage between both worlds and provokes the viewer to join. “Are you sure that it is the real story?” Baudelaire asks. “What does it matter, what does any reality outside of myself matter, if it has helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am?”³

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² Charles Baudelaire, “Windows” *Poems in Prose*, intro. James Huneker (New York: Brentano's, 1919), 46.

³ Ibid.