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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2009

What Still Remains and One Day in November by Jessica Backhaus



It is hard enough to publish one photobook at a time let alone two but Jessica Backhaus, whose book *Jesus and the Cherries* I featured in the first year on 5B4, has accomplished just that. Perhaps this is partly why she is now teaching classes at the International Center of Photography on 'Publishing Photographic Books.' This year sees the release of *What Still Remains* and *One Day in November*, both by Kehrer Verlag in Heidelberg, Germany.

The first, *What Still Remains*, is a book whose focus is on incidental objects and the still lifes that can be found by those that pay close attention to the discarded. Trash and the detritus that accumulates is treated to a vibrant color palette which in most cases is otherworldly. Drawn to neon color schemes and rich pastels, many of the objects seem to radiate light from within forcing attention where outside of her photographs, the objects could be easily overlooked.

Where her approach in *Jesus and the Cherries* was drawing comparisons from one photo to the next to build her portrait of Netno, Poland, these in *What Still Remains* stand as individuals. She points us in the direction of objects which we rediscover, and perhaps seeing their beauty, are inspired to seek out and project our own meanings and experiences.

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The best of which like *Orchids in Salzburg* with its smear of a handprint on the window sit with clear hierarchy over others while *Blue Umbrella* may represent, for me, one that would not inspire deeper insight. This hierarchy among the images is apparent throughout the book and I wish there was a harder, more demanding edit at work. My other bit of criticism which may come across as harsh is that each plate is titled and I advise to ignore them. They gush with sentimentality and cliché and are far beneath the fine images.

Like many of Kehrer's releases, the book itself is a well crafted object with a very clean, if traditional, design. Photograph on the right-hand side and a centered title on the facing left. The printing beautifully renders her unique tonalities. Jean Dykstra offers a short introductory essay entitled *The Importance of the Incidental*.



One Day in November is, for me, the much better of the two offerings. An homage to the photographer Gisele Freund, or more appropriately, to a friendship which helped shape a young artist.

In 1992, Backhaus had the opportunity to meet Gisele while she was a young student living in Paris and quickly started a friendship that would last until Freund's death in March of 2000. *One Day in November* refers to the month of that first meeting and this book demonstrates the impact that relationship would have on Backhaus.

Even with a large edit of 90+ images, the work here are a better gauge of Backhaus's talents not only as a photographer but as a bookmaker. Some images sit as individuals while she combines others into triptychs that work wonderfully.

Freund tended towards quieter images that resonate beauty and a harmony in everyday still lifes, and Backhaus is a modern successor. Jessica's world is devoid of turmoil and basks in optimism even when examining pollution or decay. This is a thread through most of her published work. At a moment in history when the world is preoccupied with depressed economies and fear of what the future may hold, her photos offer a small refuge in a better, perhaps more innocent world. Her observations, even when we have seen them before, are sound and worth our fullest attention. Thankfully due to their seductive



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qualities, there is no conscious effort involved in giving it.



One Day in November is almost square in format and has a smaller trim size than *What Still Remains*. The sea blue Japanese bookcloth, which has a debossed title along with a couple simple line drawings of gulls flying in formation, looks like the surface of water as the slight "pulls" and "runs" in the fabric resemble wave tips and foamy white caps.

I had been eagerly awaiting the release of *What Still Remains* as a follow up to *Jesus and the Cherries* and was surprised to find this third book which I had not even heard was in the works until the publication announcement. I was all the more surprised to find that I prefer it to the one I had been waiting for. I think beyond the edits of these two books it is the personal nature of *One Day in November* that makes it a more enjoyable book for me, like the friendship that inspired it, I sense a deeper and more resonating bond -- and that has made all the difference.

POSTED BY MR. WHISKETS AT 11:43 PM

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It's nice to come to this blog

FEBRUARY 16, 2009 1:29 PM

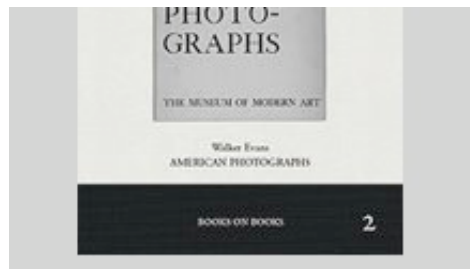
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