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Ron Jude's Nausea: The Scissors and the Cockroach

By Brad Feuerhelm on June 30, 2017

“Drawing reference to a renowned work of literature is probably not something I would recommend to younger artists. You run the risk of either having your work seem feeble and lightweight by comparison, or intellectually dubious through the forced connection”

Ron Jude is one of my new heroes. I am not above fawning or adulation when I find something that disrupts the usual tropes of my interests. Often these heroes are ones that I would not previously have explored or may have possibly even dismissed when looking at their work in haste. My compunction towards graphic “fast” images or images that have an extreme or obvious weight to them is one aspect of the incompetence I see in my own relationship with images. Perhaps I am getting older and perhaps images that take longer to percolate are becoming more relevant to me as I take more time with looking. That being said, very few “slow” photographs or bodies of work tend to hold my attention or the hunger for my eye and mind overall. I find Ron’s work, like Michael Schmidt’s “Lebensmittel” to be of a significant challenge to my previous modes of

image consumption. I can't immediately place what about the work sticks with me. It takes time, but the images somehow lodge themselves in my mind and usually come back to me long after viewing the work. This is the case with the work of Ron. I remember being affected by earlier images of his that I had seen and I began to really pay attention with his last book with MACK, "Lago". After exploring that work then working backwards, I came to the conclusion that there was something amiss that functioned between the "fast" and "slow" intake of his images for me. I still cannot place the complete effect of his work on me, but it resonates, stays and informs my own system of thinking through photography and that is incredibly important to me even if I cannot succinctly point out the one single reason it accomplishes this.

Ron was nice enough to take time out to answer a few questions about his excellent new book "*Nausea*". His answers, as to be expected are filled with insight, with detail and a great delineation of thoughtful examination of what I have termed the "sideways glance".

Brad Feuerhelm: *Nausea* is an interesting topic as a word and an idea, but has largely, in linguistics, been co-opted certainly by existentialism, materialism and a philosophy of self that is governed by Jean-Paul Sartre, whose your body of work has put to interesting use reflecting on the public school system in America's South. The qualifications of environment-learning environments and the parallax of knowledge systems being administered to youth are explored. I feel there is an uncanny parallel world happening in your images. Can you tell me what drove you to correlate the Sartre work to the institutionalization of learning?

Ron Jude: There were a number of reasons I decided to make pictures of the institutional architecture of public schools for this work, the simplest of which was that I wanted to look at something that a lot people have encountered and have some basic experience with. I liked the idea of moving through spaces that represent not only the premise of learning, but also its diametrical opposite—an amalgam of utter boredom and anxiety, brought on, to a large degree, by the spaces themselves.

In my mind, these pictures weren't reflecting on the public school system *per se*, nor were they concerned with the particulars of schools in the south. My thinking at the time was that there was a ubiquitous sameness about these places. (The schools I attended in Idaho seemed aligned aesthetically and functionally with what I saw in Baton Rouge and Atlanta.) One of my motivations behind the somewhat mannered quality of these photographs was to diminish, in a clear, visual way, their documentary value. That being said, they are photographs, after all, and it's hard to completely escape their connection to certain cultural realities.

Drawing reference to a renowned work of literature is probably not something I would recommend to younger artists. You run the risk of either having your work seem feeble and lightweight by comparison, or intellectually dubious through the forced connection. (You also have to assume the academically challenging responsibility of articulating the complexities of the thing to which you've tethered your work...) Regardless, it seemed important to me at the time to clearly establish how I was thinking about the things I was looking at, and what my intentions were for the use of photography.


By referencing Sartre's *Nausea*, I hoped to echo Antoine Roquentin's (*Nausea*'s protagonist) desire to write "Another kind of book," one that rose above the historical articles he was accustomed to writing. I wanted to make another kind of photograph, one that moved beyond the literal and prosaic, yet didn't abandon the essential, indexical qualities of the medium. I didn't want to reduce what I could do with photographs to the equivalent of writing a term paper, engaging in the humanist, rational bent that runs deep in lens-based photography, yet I had no desire to make pictures for purely formal reasons, or abandon the camera and experiment in the darkroom. I was trying to visually articulate a particular way of seeing things and thinking about the world, one that recognized and drew from the documentary impulse, but denied any real documentary utility. I wanted to cut through to something essential, something fundamental about the things I was looking at. Through attempting to acknowledge simple Existence, I hoped to evoke the actual experience of inhabiting these spaces. So, the word "nausea" becomes relevant not just as a reference to Sartre's book, but also to the spirit of how the word was used in the context of the book. The visceral jolt of raw sensation conjures Antoine's fear of existence, which in turn triggers a feeling of nausea. I was trying to get to a similar place visually. Whether that's even possible is debatable, but these pictures

are what I came up with in the attempt.



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BF: When I look at the work and distend my knowledge  and existential thought, I still come to the conclusion of something amiss, awry, etc. in the photographs. There is an element of abandon. There is the chance of looking sideways and at the unexamined—something I think features highly in many of your images in this book. There is a stillness to your work that also contemplates the aforementioned unease. The action is stripped from the frame, yet we are led to many questions about the sequence of events before the image was made. They are quite open-ended, but clearly dictated by your inner way of seeing. Training the eye to see the periphery is a gesture of employ that I consider something of a half-life to vision—to see the margins, to engage with them, but then to let them re-build or re-fashion into another dialogue often times becoming more successful by using the margin than direct supplication of enforced meaning. How did you begin to work with images of the unobserved quality and how did you begin to pursue it? It is very hard to exercise the mind to capture an image when you are purposefully trying to neglect “the event”, “the subject” or “the thing itself” for that of an essence.

RJ: I think something is amiss or awry with *every* photograph. What I've consistently tried to do is exploit those disjointed qualities and bring them to the surface. With *Nausea* I relied heavily of pictorial means, such as shallow depth-of-field and a compressed color palette. With more recent work I've experimented with sequencing and context, and interactions with sound and text.

I think I've always had an impulse to deny or reduce the narrative capacity of my photographs. Trying to tell stories with still images seems pointless and counter to their real impact, which I think is based as much on enigma as it is on information. There's a built-in disparity between the descriptive qualities of a photograph and all of those other things you mentioned—the unseen periphery, the difficulty of time... So, rather than trying fruitlessly to fill in the gaps, to make up for what isn't seen and what came before, I find it more satisfying to embrace the struggle between what we see and what we know, which is how I'm interpreting your use of the term “the unobserved quality.” I began to pursue this thread here, with this work. I wasn't making photographs based on a discernible visual theory of any kind, but rather with an open sense of experimentation. Within a certain set of parameters, I would try to upset how the picture was made and how that might alter how it was read. (The parameters were pretty basic—total abstraction was unacceptable, for instance. The pictures should be identifiable as the world around us. The sky should be up, and the dirt should be under our feet, etc.) Beyond that, there were no rules. It was art; after all, so risking failure by pushing things out to the edge seemed like a necessary part of the process.

BF: Back to *Nausea*. I remember looking at psychiatric outsider imagery for an art history class many years ago-I was delving into the use of color to embolden my understanding of what visually creates a “sickness”. Many references were made to the color yellow or dull green, which I find in your book. Though there is a great use of color in your book, the lighting (due to the perverse nature of overhead lighting in school hallways, for example) always casts an uncomfortable way of seeing or dialoguing with what is in front of the camera. References are often made to Van Gogh in this terrain. Yellow is a color of sickness, but you seem to have taken it a step further. Everything feels swashed in a layer of mud or thunderstorm in the images. When you were shooting was the use of color a conscious effort to employ this nausea or queer use of space or did it come about through editing?

RJ: The use of a “muddy” color palette was something I was definitely thinking about and trying to bring into these pictures. I think you're right about the psychological effect color has on this work, although again, I wasn't thinking directly about color theory or any texts I'd read on the subject. Tom Waits has a great line in “On a Foggy Night” on *Nighthawks at the Diner* in which he describes a “monkey shit brown” Buick. I was listening to that a lot at the time and probably riffing on that as much as anything.

I learned color use in photography from a great teacher named Brent Smith in undergraduate school. He taught me to always think about color as a formal tool that shouldn't be use by default, but never as something that became the point of the picture, either. Up until the time I made *Nausea*, however, I had been thinking pretty conventionally about color. I never ignored it, but I think I was always trying to make the materials do what they could do best, shooting during the “magic hour” and all that. It only occurred to me during this time that intentionally fucking things up with the color might actually be

and all that. It only occurred to me during this time that intentionally tucking things up with the color might actually be productive. (Shooting under fluorescent lights or through  covered glass, for instance.) Making pictures in undesirable

technical situations made my darkroom life miserable, but yielded some surprising results. (In fact one of the reasons this book contains so many previously unused images is because some of them were simply unprintable in the analog darkroom.)

BF: There is an image in the book of a rusty or bloody scissors in the book, which looks like it has been paired with cockroach on its back. I remember feeling like I had seen a similar image in your work previously. It dawned on me that there was a slight parallel to the image of an axe and a knife from “Lick Creek Line”, which was paired, in book format with an image of a bloody newspaper. There is so much suggestion in these images—images of violence, images of castration, and images in which the space in the photograph is highly compressed pushing the tension of the image to a zenith that qualifies as a discombobulated lucidity-sunlight gleaming off the edge of a blade—they become loaded totems. I’m curious as to the violence in these images. Perhaps I am taking it a bit too far, but is there any reasonable response to my conjecture or fantasy from your side that might elaborate on these tableaux?

RJ: I don’t think reading violence in these pictures, whether implicit or explicit, is unreasonable. The photograph of the ax and knife, after all, has a fair amount of blood and flesh in it. The photograph of the cockroach and scissors has always had a forensic quality for me; it’s reminiscent of a murder scene. The unsettling, yet unresolved qualities of these images are intentionally meant to illicit a response that taps into the subconscious. This was the idea behind working within this compressed space of what you accurately describe as a “discombobulated lucidity.” (I like that term in relation to these pictures.)

BF: If I’m not mistaken, this book has been percolating for a quarter of a century. I like the idea that time is an ever-present ghost in the work...i.e. that it does not look like it started in the 90s, nor does it look contemporary. It has some span of time on either side, which I think 40 years down the line, our kids may not understand. When I look at images from the 1950s for example, I can get to what I clarify to myself as a visual understanding of an era, but it doesn’t give me an insight largely because I have had no real interaction with it. That being said, we are not so far apart in age, and I really feel like perhaps I recognize certain elements within—the blackboard, the taps for the science lab water, but they do not harken nostalgia, nor do I feel like I understand their place in my own linear state of time. Is it important for you that these images do not have a clear indication as to when they were made? I almost feel as if they have more to do with your memory of school in the 70s than what you were photographing, but perhaps that has to do with economics of location of the schools?

RJ: Although autobiography has an entry-point role in a number of my later projects, I wasn’t thinking along those lines for *Nausea*. It’s 2017 and my son attends a poorly funded public elementary school in Oregon that always strikes me as something that could have also been pulled straight out of my childhood in 1975. I think there is a ubiquity of this type of architecture out there that is indeed timeless, whether it’s due strictly to economics or just poor planning is another question. To some degree I think it stems from the basic utilitarian purpose of the structures. But to answer your question, I think nostalgia is an interesting subject in terms of how photography plays into the softening of our memories, so I’ve never considered it something to stay away from. That being said, I think you’re right, due to the geological pace of change in these spaces, they do appear to be fixed in time, and I think for what I’m trying to do with these pictures, that’s a useful byproduct.

“I think something is amiss or awry with *every* photograph. What I’ve consistently tried to do is exploit those disjointed qualities and bring them to the surface”



BF: Schools without children's voices, schools with holes in panes of glass, silence—has it been asked of you whether or not these may reflect not only institutional learning, but also school shootings?

RJ: No it hasn't been asked, but now that you have, I'll say I'm far more interested in the psychological weight of the grind of the everyday than I am with specific events that inflict psychological shock.

BF: Completely fair and point taken. This book, getting back to the notion of linear time and now technology also presents a conundrum. There is a distinct lack of technology shown. There are no overhead projectors, iPads, or implements of the

technological force that is currently invading schools. So, perhaps this is a small bit of a time capsule. You are an educator as well. I think I have traced some of your movements between ASX⁽¹⁾ South, New York, and Oregon, where you now teach. Do you

personally feel that education or institutionalized education is a breeding ground for ideas, mental progression etc. or do you in fact feel more towards the bullpen and turnstile in which thought is manufactured in a very certain way which may or may not limit what education actually means in the present?

RJ: That's a complicated, very big question that's hard to answer succinctly and in black and white terms. I've been teaching for over twenty years to a large degree because it's a way we American artists can continue our work without succumbing to abject poverty. But it would be cynical of me to say that's the only reason I teach. Like everyone else in academia, I have my good days and I have my bad days. I have moments when I think, "What the hell am I doing here? What am I hoping to accomplish?" Not only do we regularly confront students who don't seem to care about art, but we also have to battle the cluster fuck of university bureaucracy, extremely poor funding, and corporate-minded administrators who can't see the forest for the trees. Rarely is there a day that I have a "pure" experience with the vocation of teaching art to young people. But I do have those days, and every year there are a handful of students who transform and suddenly see the value of art, both personally and from a broader cultural standpoint. During those moments I do indeed think education can be a breeding ground for ideas. I myself attended a public university, after all, and when I entered I had no aspirations to be an artist. All it took was the encounter with a few people who took an interest in me to send me down this path. So, at the end of the day, I can't believe that what we're doing at the university succumbs to all that is wrong with the institutionalized structure of education.

But I think your question has less to do with me and my experience as an art professor and more to do with the role education plays, in general, in creating creative, independent thinkers as citizens. There's the line of thought that you speak of in terms of the bullpen and turnstile (meat grinder?), which I think is pretty easy to subscribe to, especially when you see so many kids falling through the cracks due to overenrolled classrooms and pedagogy that, out of necessity, favors the group over the individual. I think that's why we've seen a whole cottage industry of Montessori schools and other educational alternatives popping up over the past twenty-five years, which is great, but also leaves me feeling that all the best people are abandoning public education. Is standardized public education a breeding ground for ideas? Perhaps not, but there are a lot of forces at work to keep our kids from being free thinkers, and I don't think public education is necessarily at the top of that list. And although there is a lot that is wrong with the way we cultivate knowledge in a classroom setting, I think it would be a mistake to jettison public education because it's broken. We need to fund it properly and bring innovative ideas about learning into the classroom. Ultimately I don't think the current choice in education is either Pink Floyd's *The Wall* or Montessori. Things are more complex than that.

BF: The Trophy cabinet—I would be curious if there was a tipping point or single image where this project began and if you feel that it is complete, which image exemplifies a final?

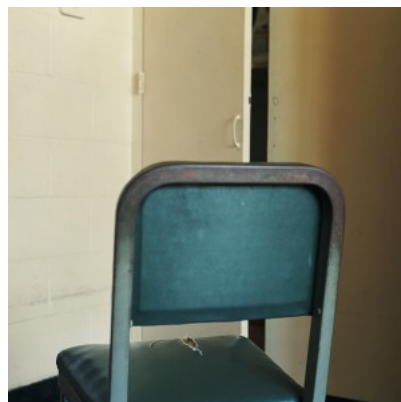
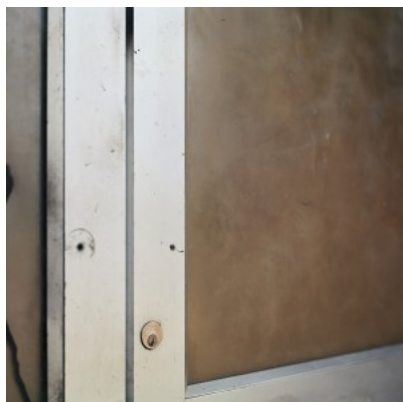
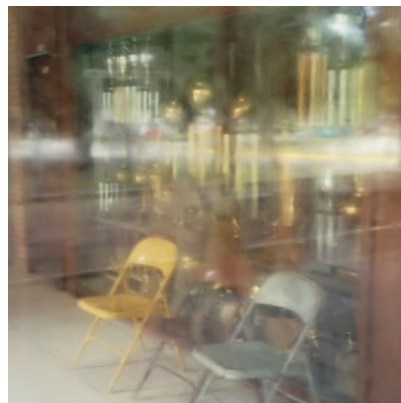
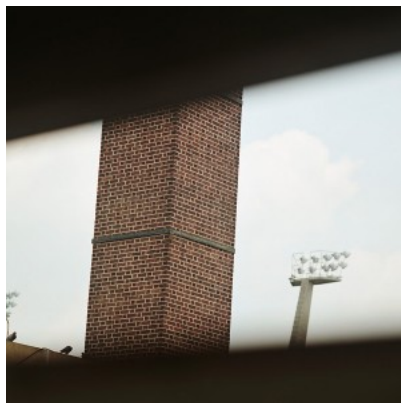
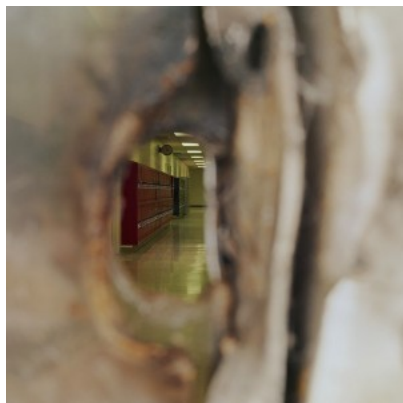
RJ: There were probably a few images that got things rolling, but if I had to pick one from the book, it might be the image of the industrial chair with the faux leather blue back and seat. It has a small tear in the seat and the chair is facing the corner, in which there's a cabinet whose door is slightly ajar. I can still remember making that photo, and the feeling that I was on to something. It did what I thought I was looking for in making still-life images that seemed evocative of something raw and unsettling.

BF: One last technical consideration—the cover feels like sandpaper and looks perhaps like it has been shat on by a pigeon. The wraps are very tactile. When I mention sandpaper, it's nice to feel I have a grip on it, but it also leaves dirt and dead skin from my calloused hands on the surface projecting a very thin bit of my corporality on it. Did the cover have to do with Sartre and a version of *Nausea*?

RJ: The graphic black & white cover design was a loose reference to the 1964 New Directions paperback version of *Nausea*

that I own. (The drip was pulled from one of the images in the book.) The stock for the dust jacket was something Michael Mack found and we both liked for the tactile reasons you just mentioned. Without getting too clever, the surface quality of

the dust jacket seems to have something to do with the ideas explored in both books. As for the pigeon shit associations, you're not alone—I've joked with Mårten Lange that one of his pigeons from *Citizen* was responsible for the mess.



Ron Jude (<http://ronjude.com>)

Nausea (<http://www.mackbooks.co.uk/books/1163-Nausea.html>)

Mack

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