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RON JUDE ON USING VISUAL ICONOGRAPHY TO SEQUENCE PHOTO BOOKS

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By Conor Risch



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Jude chose to make images in public high schools because the banal subject matter "doesn't present anything all that interesting to look at"

on the surface," which signals to viewers that he's after something deeper.

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For a story in the August issue of *PDN*, we spoke with Ron Jude about his book *Nausea*, which he published earlier this year with MACK Books. One of the unique things about the book is that Jude created it with photographs he made 25 years ago as a graduate student and in the year following the completion of his MFA. Photographers often revisit older work in retrospective books and exhibitions. However Jude's approach to *Nausea* makes it feel contemporary, as if it were a new body of work, the latest in a string of books he has made from personal projects, including *Lago*, *Lick Creek Line*, *Alpine Star* and *Emmet*.

In putting *Nausea* together, Jude was looking back at some of the ideas that have defined his career. He also brought to *Nausea* more than a decade of bookmaking experience. "If I'd tried to make a book out of this work 25 years ago, I didn't know what I was doing, I didn't know books," he explains. "I had a lot of books, but I didn't know what I know now about how to put a book together."

The images in *Nausea* depict public high schools in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Atlanta, Georgia, but, Jude says, it's not a documentary project about public education. Instead, Jude used a banal subject that "doesn't present anything all that interesting to look at on the surface" to signal to viewers that he's after something other than documentary representation. Jude makes his pictures "by going out into the world with a camera." Then, through editing and sequencing he develops what he calls a "psychological space." His work isn't about telling a specific story to viewers, but about using visual language to tap into his viewers' subconscious.

Jude revisited the images in *Nausea* while he was considering a collaborative project. In the process of taking a deep look at the work he realized that the ideas he had when he made the *Nausea* photographs "are still pretty present in everything I'm doing now.... It was that moment that set me off on a very specific direction in terms of how I was thinking about how a photograph was supposed to operate and how I wanted a photograph to operate, and how to do that visually."

Nausea, Jude says, "doesn't have the kind of arc and structure" that some of his previous books have, "but there are certain sequences, anywhere from 4-5 images up to 10 images, little blocks of images within the book that are completely informed by what I've learned about how to put together a string of images in a way that leads you through the work without being obvious."

In *Lago*, for instance, citrus and water are part of a "recurring iconography" that leads viewers through the work. "And if you look at *Nausea*, I did the same thing with bricks: Multiple bricks, singular bricks—that's the basic iconography that runs through the whole thing. Bricks on windows, bricks in a roof, bricks on a wall. Being very careful to stay away from any Pink Floyd references," he says.

"The tricky part," Jude explains, is to use these visual cues to bring viewers from one picture to the next "without it becoming clear on the surface exactly what you're doing.... I think if anybody really studies [*Nausea*] or any of my books, you start to pick up on those things...but you don't want to overplay that hand because then it just becomes a little trick that you're doing and then suddenly that's what the book is about."

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