

# THE JUDICIOUS PALETTE OF TIME

BY JAMES R. HUGUNIN



HARLEM VALLEY / WINGDALE PROJECT # 9334 BUILDING 34- POWER PLANT  
(TOXIC OIL SPILL WITH BACTERIAL MAT BELOW CONSUMING IT....)

AND HOW FINE A PLACE THE HOUSE SEEMED TO ME NOW THAT IT WAS IMPERCEPTIBLY NEARING THE BRINK  
OF DISSOLUTION AND SILENT OBLIVION.

— W. G. SEBALD, *THE RINGS OF SATURN* (1998)

I AM DRAWN TO THE INCREDIBLY PARADOXICAL BEAUTY AS EXPRESSED IN THE TRANSFORMATION FROM  
MAN-MADE ORDER INTO THE BEAUTY OF NATURAL CHAOS.

— AVERY DANZIGER

WILLIAM HENRY FOX-TALBOT'S THE PENCIL OF NATURE (1844) ASSERTS: "PHOTOGRAPHY WILL ENABLE US TO INTRODUCE INTO OUR PICTURES A MULTITUDE OF MINUTE DETAILS WHICH ADD TO THE TRUTH AND REALITY OF THE REPRESENTATION, BUT WHICH NO ARTIST WOULD TAKE THE TROUBLE TO COPY FAITHFULLY FROM NATURE." DETAILS AS DEMANDED BY CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION, BUT ALSO "ROUGH," "INTRICATE," "VARIED," "BROKEN" FORMS SO VALUED BY LOVERS OF THE PREVAILING AESTHETIC OF THAT DAY, THE PICTURESQUE. TALBOT CONTINUES: "A CASUAL GLEAM OF SUNSHINE, OR A CAST SHADOW THROWN ACROSS HIS PATH, A TIME-WITHERED OAK, OR A MOSS-COVERED STONE MAY AWAKEN A TRAIN OF THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS, AND PICTURESQUE IMAGININGS."

WALT WHITMAN EXPANDED ON THE POETICS OF THE EVERYDAY, THAT WHICH TALBOT SEES AS A PERFECT SUBJECT FOR THE NEW MEDIUM. IN THE LEAVES OF GRASS (1855), THE POET WRITES: "I DO NOT DOUBT BUT THE MAJESTY AND BEAUTY OF THE WORLD ARE LATENT IN ANY IDEA OF THE WORLD . . . I DO NOT DOUBT THERE IS FAR MORE IN TRIVIALITIES, INSECTS, VULGAR PERSONS, SLAVES, DWARFS, WEEDS, REJECTED REFUSE, THAN I HAVE SUPPOSED [MY EMPHASIS]." THIS IS NOT FAR REMOVED FROM FRENCH SURREALIST GEORGES BATAILLE'S 1929 CONCEPTION OF THE "FORMLESS" (L'INFORME), WHICH INCLUDES: "MESS," "JUMBLE," AND "TRASH."

THIS PICTURESQUE AESTHETIC, WHICH STILL WORKS ON OUR IMAGINATIONS, EMERGES EARLY IN PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY, STARTING WITH THE CALOTYPES OF WILLIAM HENRY FOX-TALBOT, MATURING IN THE WORK OF D. O. HILL, AND CONTINUING ON THROUGH LATE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY PICTORIALIST SOFT-FOCUS AND NON-SILVER MEDIA. THEN INTO MODERNIST CRISP DOCUMENTARY AS IN WALKER EVANS'S TREATMENT OF WEATHER-BEATEN SHARECROPPER SHACKS OF WHICH JAMES AGEE'S DESCRIPTION OF IN LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN (1941) TELLS US WHAT ATTRACTED THAT PHOTOGRAPHER'S EYE: ". . . EACH TEXTURE IN THE WOOD . . . IS DISTINCT IN THE EYE AS A RAZOR; EACH NAIL-HEAD IS DISTINCT; EACH SEAM AND SPLIT; AND EACH SLIGHT WARPING, EACH RANDOM KNOT AND KNOTHOLE: AND IN EACH BOARD, AS LOVELY A MUSIC AS A CONTOUR MAP AND UNIQUE AS A THUMBPRINT, ITS GRAIN, WHICH WAS ITS LIVING STRENGTH, AND THESE WILD CREEKS CUT STIFF ACROSS BY SAWS; MOVING NEARER THE CLOSE-LAID ARCS AND SHADOWS OF THOSE TEARING WHEELS."

MORE RECENTLY, DECREPIT STRUCTURES HAVE BEEN SOURCES OF INTEREST AND INTERVENTION TO ARTISTS: MARGARET STRATTON AND JOSÉ FERREIRA (UNFUNCTIONAL CARCERAL INSTITUTIONS), CANDACE SCHUTT (LONG-ABANDONED HOUSES IN JOB-DEPLETED MICHIGAN), ANDREW MOORE (THE RUINS OF DETROIT’S DEFUNCT AUTO INDUSTRY), SCOTT HOCKING (SCULPTURAL INTERVENTIONS AMONG DETROIT’S RUINS IN HIS 2010 SERIES, “GARDEN OF THE GODS”), SARA VANDERBEEK (IMAGES OF RUINED POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS), LIEKO SHIGA (PHOTOGRAPHING PHOTOGRAPHS IN SITU, SCATTERED AMONG JAPAN’S TSUNAMI DEBRIS), ALFONSO ZUBIAGA AND SIMON NORFOLK (GHOST TOWNS, LONG-ABANDONED SITES AROUND THE GLOBE), ALAN COHEN (HIS LINES OF AUTHORITY PROJECT, RECORDING FRAGMENTS OF SPACE DEFINING LEGAL BORDERS DIVIDING LAND OFTEN FRAUGHT WITH VIOLENCE PAST OR PRESENT); MICHELLE LORD (DIGITAL FANTASIES FIGURING THE FUTURE RUINS OF J. G. BALLARD), ALISON RUTTAN AND SONJA KUIJPERS (MAQUETTES OF RUINS BASED ON PHOTOS), JUD TURNER (MIXED-MEDIA RELIEFS INSPIRED BY DEFUNCT FACTORIES, SEE OBLIVION FACTORY, 2001), LEBBEUS WOODS (ARCHITECTURAL DEPICTIONS OF ALTERED WAR-SCARRED STRUCTURES), PHOTOGRAPHER AND URBAN SOCIOLOGIST, CAMILO JOSÉ VERGARA (A “SKYSCRAPER RUINS PARK”) AND, THE FOCUS OF THIS ESSAY, AVERY DANZIGER’S DETAILED PHOTOGRAPHS OF FORMER MENTAL INSTITUTION, NOW NEAR COLLAPSE.



HARLEM VALLEY / WINGDALE PROJECT #7146  
(ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 2011)

THE RANGE OF THIS WORK IN TERMS OF PROCESS, SUBJECT, AND APPROACH SHOULD MAKE IT OBVIOUS THAT THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “PICTURESQUE” AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD TO REMAIN CONSTANT ACROSS THIS TIME CONTINUUM. IN FACT, WHAT IS MOST INTERESTING IS HOW A PERSISTENT FOCUS ON THE RUIN OR SITE OF DESTRUCTION AND DEBRIS (AS ACTUAL SITE OR AS CONSTRUCT) MUTATED THROUGH “PARADIGM SHIFTS” AS TO HOW SUCH SITES ARE CONSTRUED AS KNOWLEDGE AND AESTHETIC CONCERNS. SPOKESPERSON OF

THE PICTURESQUE, WILLIAM GILPIN, ASSERTED CONCERNS THAT ARE SIMILAR TO, YET DIFFERENT FROM, CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND WRITERS ENGAGING MODERN RUINS AS SUBJECT MATTER. THE MORE RECENT RIFFS ON THE RUIN AS PICTURESQUE SCENE (WE CAN TERM IT “THE NEW PICTURESQUE,” LESS SYMPATHETIC OBSERVERS TERM IT “RUIN PORN”) DISINVITE RELAXFUL CONTEMPLATION, TRAFFICKING IN NEW CIRCUITS OF MEANING. THEY PRODUCE A NEW TYPE OF KNOWLEDGE FROM THESE PERENNIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC THEMES.

FOR HIS MOST RECENT BODY OF WORK — SHOT AT THE HARLEM VALLEY PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL AND JUVENILE CORRECTIONS FACILITIES, DOVER, NEW YORK (2011 - TO THE PRESENT) — DANZIGER EXPLORES MODERN RUINS. HE RECORDS THE EFFECTS OF THE “JUDICIOUS MALLET” OF TIME, AS WILLIAM GILPIN PUT IT IN HIS INFLUENTIAL LATE-EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TRACT, *THREE ESSAYS: ON PICTURESQUE BEAUTY; ON PICTURESQUE TRAVEL; AND ON SKETCHING LANDSCAPE: TO WHICH IS ADDED A POEM, ON LANDSCAPE PAINTING*. CONTEMPORARY NOVELIST, W. G. SEBALD, IN HIS NOVEL *THE RINGS OF SATURN* (1998) CAPTURES THIS MELANCHOLIC SENTIMENT WELL: “AND HOW FINE A PLACE THE HOUSE SEEMED TO ME NOW THAT IT WAS IMPERCEPTIBLY NEARING THE BRINK OF DISSOLUTION AND SILENT OBLIVION.” IN SEBALD’S NOVEL, *THE IMMIGRANTS* (1992), THE PROTAGONIST TAKES A SUNDAY PEREGRINATION IN THE RUINS OF MANCHESTER, ENGLAND, AND DISCOVERS AN ARTIST, FERBER, WHO FEELS CLOSER TO DUST — “THE GREY, VELVETY SINTER LEFT WHEN MATTER DISSOLVED, LITTLE BY LITTLE, INTO NOTHINGNESS” — THAN TO LIGHT, AIR, OR WATER. THIS ARTIST IS A PAINTER, BUT IF HE’D BEEN A PHOTOGRAPHER, HE’D PROBABLY BEING MAKING IMAGES LIKE DANZIGER’S, SUSPENDING PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE, HALTING TIME’S GALLOP, REANIMATING DYING SPACES. SOMETIMES THE PASSAGE OF TIME ITSELF CAN RESULT IN SUCH REVIVIFICATION.

HEINRICH BÖLL, IN *DER ENGEL SCHWIEG* (1950, 1992), NOTES THAT SOME BOMB SITES OVER TIME TRANSFORMED INTO DENSE GREEN VEGETATION, ROADS WINDING THROUGH LIKE “PEACEFUL DEEP-SET COUNTRY LANES.” SEBALD REACTS DIFFERENTLY TO ABANDONED WWII BRITISH MILITARY INSTALLATIONS: “BUT THE CLOSER I CAME TO THESE RUINS, THE MORE ANY NOTION OF A MYSTERIOUS ISLE OF THE DEAD RECEDED,

AND THE MORE I IMAGINED MYSELF AMIDST THE REMAINS OF OUR OWN CIVILIZATION AFTER ITS EXTINCTION IN SOME FUTURE CATASTROPHE.” WHEN I READ THIS PASSAGE FROM THE RINGS OF SATURN, IT RECALLED MY PRECISE RESPONSE TO DANZIGER’S PHOTOGRAPHS OF A TIME-BLASTED FORMER MENTAL HOSPITAL.

THE INHERENT TEMPORAL ASPECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY — BEGUN AT THE MOMENT OF EXPOSURE WHICH SEPARATES THE INSTANT THE SHUTTER OPENS AND CLOSSES, TO THE LATER MOMENT WHEN THE IMAGES BECOMES VISIBLE — IS DIRECTLY CONNECTED TO ITS LIGHT-SENSITIVE CHAIN OF CAUSALITY, ITS ABILITY TO PAINT, IN WINK OR VIA TIME-EXPOSURE, WITH LIGHT. THAT “WINK,” THE INSTANTANEOUS EXPOSURE, “WRECKS” THE FLOW OF TIME, ABRUPTLY CRASHING IT ONTO FILM, A CONTINGENT EVENT IS CAPTURED, WHILE THE TIME-EXPOSURE LAYERS TIME, GENTLY EXTRACTING THE QUINTESSENCE OF THE SUBJECT (IN THIS CASE DECREPIT HOSPITALS) DURING MINUTES IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA AS IN AVERY DANZIGER’S TIME-EXPOSURES MADE USING A TRIPOD-CHAINED CAMERA WHERE, RATHER THAN NEGATED AS IN THE INSTANTANEOUS SHOT, TEMPORAL

FLOW BECOMES AN EQUAL PARTNER IN MAKING THESE WELL-CONSIDERED PHOTOGRAPHS.

IN HIS EARLIER WORK DATING FROM THE MID-1970S, DANZIGER OFTEN MELDED HAND-HELD TIME EXPOSURES WITH FLASH-FILL, CREATING HYBRID EXPOSURES. HERE FLASH PROMISES INSTANT REVELATION OF TRUTH, WHILE THE TIME-EXPOSURE ENDEAVORS TO REGAIN SOME OF THE FEATURES THROUGH WHICH PAINTING TRADITIONALLY ENACTS TIME. HENCE, THE “REALITY” OF THE SUBJECT PHOTOGRAPHED IS QUESTIONED. SUCH EXPOSURE HYBRIDIZATION IS FOUND IN THIS ARTIST’S COEUR FIDELE SERIES FROM THE EARLY 1980S. DANZIGER (BORN IN CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA, RESIDING IN LOS ANGELES AT THE TIME OF THIS EARLIER



COEUR FIDELE SERIES (CIBACHROME, 1980)

PRODUCTION, NOW BASED ON THE EAST COAST) TRAINED HIS CAMERA FROM A HIGH ANGLE DOWN ONTO ORNATE PET GRAVES IN PARIS'S OLDEST PET CEMETERY. UNLIKE HIS CURRENT SUBJECT, THESE GRANITE-INSCRIBED, THE HEADSTONES RESIST BECOMING RUSTED OUT RUINS AND ATTEMPT TO COUNTER THE MORTALITY OF THE ANIMAL BURIED BENEATH, TESTIFYING TO THE ENDURING FAITHFULNESS OF THE BELOVED PET TO ITS OWNER WHO HAS RETURNED THE FAVOR BY ATTACHING A PHOTO-CERAMIC OF THE ANIMAL TO THE COLORFUL FLOWER-SURROUNDED HEADSTONE. ALL THIS SENTIMENTALISM PLAYS UPON CEMETERY VISITORS' HEARTSTRINGS. YES, IT'S ALL KITSCHY SUBJECT MATTER, BUT THIS IS WHAT ATTRACTED THIS PHOTOGRAPHER'S SLY EYE — JUST AS DID THE TIME-DISSOLVED INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES HE NOW SHOOTS.



MUMMY # 1, GUANAJUATO, MEXICO (CIBACHROME, 1976)

IN 1976, HE WENT TO GUANAJUATO, MEXICO TO PHOTOGRAPH THE FAMOUS MUMMIES THERE. THOSE GROTESQUE CADAVERS ARE VISUALLY REANIMATED USING TIME EXPOSURES WITH HAND-HELD CAMERA, OR NUDGED TRIPOD, AND FOLLOWED BY A BURST OF FLASH. AN ANALOGOUS PROJECT FROM THE EARLY 1980S, GARDENS OF BABYLON, HAD THE ARTIST SHOOTING, IN THE SAME SLOW-

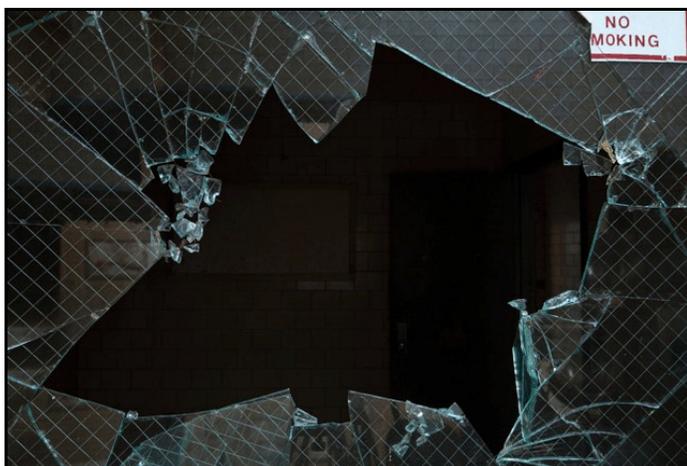
EXPOSURE WITH FILL-FLASH MANNER, CLASSIC STATUARY OF IDEALIZED HUMAN FORMS, THE AESTHETIC REVERSE OF THOSE HORRIFIC MUMMIES. HERE, AGAIN, THE MIXTURE OF BLUR AND SHARP RENDITION LEAVES PASSAGES OF BLURRED COLOR OVER-WASHING SHARP REALISTIC FORMS. STONE FIGURES BECOME “THE UNDEAD,” TAKING ON AN UNCANNY ANIMATION THAT IS AS MUCH PAINTERLY AS PHOTOGRAPHIC. THIS EARLIER BODY OF WORK — SHOT ON KODACHROME, PRINTED ON CIBACHROME — ARE OFTEN SITES OF DEATH. THIS IS AKIN TO HIS MOST RECENT PROJECT, LARGE COLOR SATURATED PHOTOGRAPHS OF MYRIAD INTERIOR SCENES IN THE FORMER HARLEM VALLEY PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL. DYING THE SLOW DEATH OF NEGLECT, THESE SPACES ARE ALSO REANIMATED, BUT USING TRIPOD-FIRM TIME EXPOSURES WHICH ARE OCCASIONALLY AIDED BY DIGITAL MANIPULATION AND HYPED-UP COLOR.



HARLEM VALLEY / WINGDALE PROJECT #8357  
(ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 2011)

THROUGHOUT HIS PRODUCTION, DANZIGER MAKES US AWARE OF THE DISJUNCTION BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPH AND REFERENT. SCENES BECOME MEANINGFUL ONLY IN, AND AS, ITS REPRESENTATION. IN THIS LATEST SERIES, HE PROBLEMATIZES FIGURE/GROUND RELATIONS, OR COLLAPSES THEM FLAT, EMPLOYING THE GREENBERGIAN TERMS OF HIGH MODERNIST ABSTRACT PAINTING TO IMAGE THE COLLAPSING INSTITUTIONAL SITE HE'S

CHOSEN TO VISUALLY EXPLORE. ALSO LINKING EARLER WORK WITH LATER IS THE ARTIST'S ANIMUS TOWARD CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION, HIS DESIRE TO FIND SOMETHING ENDURING IN A FUGITIVE EXISTENCE: "FOR ME, AS BIZARRE AS IT MAY SOUND, STANDING IN MANY OF THESE BUILDINGS [THE MENTAL FACILITY], AMIDST ALL THE CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION, IT FEELS MUCH THE SAME FOR ME AS STANDING IN A GROVE OF GIANT SEQUOIAS OUT IN CALIFORNIA." A STATEMENT RECALLING AUTHOR J.J. FURNAS'S SUCCINCT OBSERVATION: "DEATH IS A LOW CHEMICAL TRICK PLAYED ON EVERYBODY BUT SEQUOIA TREES."



HARLEM VALLEY / WINGDALE PROJECT #8806  
(ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 2011)

BOTH DANZIGER AND FURNAS'S STATEMENTS MORE THAN HINT AT OUR FEAR OF DEATH. POLISH THINKER, ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, IN MORTALITY, IMMORTALITY AND OTHER LIFE STRATEGIES WRITES THAT "IN THE LIGHT OF MORTALITY, ALL MEANINGS OF LIFE LOOK PALLID, WAN, INSUBSTANTIAL. THIS LIGHT MUST BE EXTINGUISHED, IF ONLY FOR A TIME AND AN OCCASION, FOR LIFE MEANINGS TO APPEAR

SOLID AND RELIABLE," ADDING THAT THERE, "WOULD PROBABLY BE NO CULTURE WERE HUMANS UNAWARE OF THEIR MORTALITY; . . ." IN THESE SEVERAL BODIES OF WORK,

DANZIGER EXPLICITLY ENGAGES THIS COUNTER-MNEMONIC. ONE IMAGE EXPLICITLY HARKENS TOWARD OUR DARK DEMISE, HARLEM VALLEY/WINGDALE PROJECT #8806, WHERE A BLACK VOID AWAITS BEYOND A HOLE SMASHED THROUGH SAFETY GLASS, FIGURING A VIOLENT EXIT.

WHEREAS WRITER W.G. SEBALD'S "MELANCHOLIC LONGINGS" LEADS HIM IN NOVEL AFTER NOVEL TO TRAVEL IN SEARCH OF REMNANTS OF HIS OWN CHILDHOOD AND FOR THE ORIGINS OF HIS MELANCHOLY DISPOSITION TO SEE THE WORLD AS ONE OF PERMANENT CALAMITY, DANZIGER'S ESCHEWS THE PERSONAL AND REVERSES SUCH CALAMITY BY GIVING THE ICONIC OBJECTS THAT HE IMAGES — GRAVE SITES, STATUARY, AND RUINS — WHAT CRITIC WALTER BENJAMIN REFERRED TO AS AURA.

IN AN ESSAY ON CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, WALTER BENJAMIN RECALLS THAT THE POET FAMOUSLY OPPOSED PAINTING AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARGUING PAINTING'S ABILITY TO CONTINUOUSLY FEED OUR DESIRE WITH A BEAUTY CONJURED "OUT OF THE WOMB OF TIME", WHILE PHOTOGRAPHY, MERE MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION, IS IMMEDIATE, BARREN AND LACKS DEPTH, AND SO CAN ONLY GIVE US A QUICK SATIATION; HENCE, IT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR A DECLINE OF AURA. BUT, AS IS WELL-KNOWN, BENJAMIN ARGUES CERTAIN PHOTOGRAPHS, LONG-TIME EXPOSED IMAGES, CAN EVOKE A CERTAIN PERCEPTIBILITY HE TERMS AURA. HE EXPLAINS THIS AURATIC EXPERIENCE AS "REST[ING] ON THE TRANSPOSITION OF A RESPONSE COMMON IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INANIMATE OR NATURAL OBJECT AND MAN. THE PERSON WE LOOK AT, OR WHO FEELS HE IS BEING LOOKED AT, LOOKS AT US IN TURN. TO PERCEIVE THE AURA OF AN OBJECT WE LOOK AT MEANS TO INVEST IT WITH THE ABILITY TO LOOK AT US IN RETURN," WHICH "COMPRISES THE 'UNIQUE MANIFESTATION OF A DISTANCE'." A FEW LINES ON, BENJAMIN BOLSTERS HIS INSIGHTS WITH A CITATION FROM MARCEL PROUST: "SOME PEOPLE WHO ARE FOND OF SECRETS FLATTER THEMSELVES THAT OBJECTS RETAIN SOMETHING OF THE GAZE THAT HAS RESTED ON THEM." AND FURTHER ON, HE CITES PAUL VALÉRY ON AURA AND DREAMS: "IN DREAMS, HOWEVER, THERE IS AN EQUATION. THE THINGS I SEE, SEE ME AS MUCH AS I SEE THEM." I SUGGEST DANZIGER'S PROJECTS DISCUSSED ABOVE WORK AGAINST THEIR ROOTS IN MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION IN BOTH THEIR ANALOGUE AND DIGITAL MODES BECAUSE OF THAT ARTIST'S MASTERY OF EXPOSURE MANIPULATION AND THE PAINTERLY

EFFECTS ACHIEVED THEREWITH, AS WELL AS HIS CREATION OF INTENSE, EXAGGERATED COLOR.



HARLEM VALLEY / WINGDALE PROJECT #9334 BUILDING 35,  
POWER PLANT I (DETAIL, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 2011)

THIS CONTRASTING OF TWO TYPES OF EXPOSURE (INSTANTANEOUS/TIMED), AND THE LATTER'S RESULTING AURA, IS REMARKED ON IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S FAMOUS 1931, A SHORT HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY. EXPANDING ON BENJAMIN, THIERRY DE DUVE'S ESSAY IN OCTOBER 5 (SUMMER 1978), "TIME EXPOSURE AND SNAPSHOT," EQUATES THE SNAPSHOT WITH TRAUMA (PARRYING ITS SHOCK), THE TIME-EXPOSURE, SLOW OPTICS, WITH MOURNING (MELANCHOLY) AND IMPLIES A RECEPTIVITY OR VULNERABILITY OR EXPOSURE TO WHATEVER IS ENCOUNTERED. IN DANZIGER'S CASE, WHAT IS ENCOUNTERED ARE MEMORIAL SITES: THE "UNDEAD" OF MUMMIES AND STATUARY, AND NOW THE PAINT-SHREDDED, RUST-

PAINTED INTERIORS OF A DEFUNCT INSTITUTION RIFE WITH WITH OBSCURE SIGNAGE, GRAFFITI, AND THE FLOTSAM AND JETSAM OF ONCE FUNCTIONAL OBJECTS. TO LOOK AT DANZIGER'S WORK, ESPECIALLY HIS MOST RECENT, IS TO ENTER A DREAM-SPACE THAT THE ARTIST SHARES WITH US. IT ENCOURAGES AN AESTHETIC PROJECTION THAT BOTH SOOTHES AND REKINDLES THE DESIRE FOR A MORE IMMEDIATE CONTACT WITH THESE OBJECTS, EVEN RUINS. OVER A THIRTY-YEAR SPAN OF WORKING, HIS AESTHETIC CONCERNS WITH THESE PARAMETERS HAVE REMAINED STEADY, EVEN THOUGH HIS SUBJECT MATTER HAS VARIED.

THE AGE OF THE MACHINE, REACHING ITS PINNACLE IN THE 1920s, WAS CELEBRATED IN MODERNIST DEPICTIONS OF THE MODERN FORMS OF UTILITARIAN ARCHITECTURE, SUCH AS EDWARD WESTON'S ARMCO STEEL WORKS (1922) WHICH FINDS ESSENTIAL FORMS EMERGING FROM GLEAMING STEEL, ENHANCED BY THE PLAY OF LIGHT ACROSS THIS GIANT "LIGHT-MODULATOR." THIS MONOCHROMATIC PAEAN TO THE



HARLEM VALLEY / WINGDALE PROJECT  
(ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 2011)

NEW SUGGESTS A COMPARISON WITH DANZIGER’S “TIME-POUNDED” RENDITION OF A SIMILAR SCENE FOUND IN THAT DECREPIT MENTAL FACILITY.

THE TWO COMPOSITIONS HAVE FORMAL SIMILARITIES, BUT GLEAMING STEEL HAS, IN A SLOW COMBUSTION, RUSTED SINCE THE STRUCTURE WAS BUILT IN 1924 AND CLOSED IN 1994.

INTERESTINGLY, EACH CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS “BEAUTIFUL,” BUT IN OPPOSING FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND AESTHETICS: MODERNIST VERSUS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE REJECTION OF MODERNIST FAITH IN TECHNOLOGY, FORM-FOLLOWS-

FUNCTION, AND WHOLENESS, AND SO IT RAISES THE FRAGMENT AND THE RUIN TO A LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE NOT SEEN SINCE THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES’ LOVE OF RUINS. IN “THE WORK OF IRON” (1858), JOHN RUSKIN GAVE VOICE TO PICTURESQUE INTERPRETATION OF WHAT HIS FELLOW MEN REVEILED AS SPOILED IRON: “. . . WE SUPPOSE IT TO BE A GREAT DEFECT IN IRON THAT IT IS SUBJECT TO RUST. BUT NOT AT ALL. ON THE CONTRARY, THE MOST PERFECT AND USEFUL STATE OF IT IS THAT OCHREOUS STAIN; [IT IS] SUNSHINE, NOT OF LANDSCAPE, BUT OF DWELLING PLACE. . . . IT IS NOT A FAULT IN THE IRON, BUT A VIRTUE, TO BE SO FOND OF GETTING RUSTED, . . . WE MAY SAY THAT IRON RUSTED IS LIVING; BUT WHEN PURE OR POLISHED, DEAD.”



DANZIGER’S EXPLORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL RUINS IN HIS HARLEM VALLEY/ WINGDALE PROJECT OFFER INTENSE PHOTOGRAPHIC SHOOTING EXPERIENCES IN CRUMBLING HAZMAT ZONES — HE WEARS PROTECTIVE GEAR, LOOKING MUCH LIKE A DEEP-SEA DIVER — RESULTING IN VERY LARGE, HIGH-RESOLUTION, VIVIDLY COLORED ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINTS. DETAILED, STRUCTURED,

THE DIGITAL IMAGES ARE EXTRACTED FROM MAINLY DARK, DANK, FRAGMENTED INTERIORS. WHEN THE RANGE BETWEEN HIGHLIGHT AND SHADOW IS TOO GREAT TO BE ENCOMPASSED BY A SINGLE EXPOSURE, HE'LL MAKE SEVERAL BRACKETED EXPOSURES, LAYERING AND COMBINING THEM VIA HDRI IN PHOTOSHOP, THUS RETAINING SUPERB DETAIL THROUGHOUT.

THESE SPACES — DEVOID OF PEOPLE, BUT NOT MEMORIES — REVEAL GRAFFITI AND MESSAGES OF DESPERATION FROM LONG-GONE INMATES, IN A PLACE WHERE TIME WOULD SEEM TO HAVE STOOD STILL. IN THESE IMAGES ONE SENSES MOST DIRECTLY A CAPACITY TO REGISTER THE PERSISTENCE OF PAST SUFFERING AS ABSORBED INTO THE SUBSTANCE OF LIVED SPACE, INTO THE SETTING OF HUMAN HISTORY; YET GIVEN THE ARTIST'S SKILL IN POETIC VISUALIZATION, THE "EXISTENCE OF THE HORRIBLE IN EVERY ATOM OF AIR" THAT SO PERVADES THESE SPACES HAS BEEN AESTHETICALLY REDEEMED.



HARLEM VALLEY / WINGDALE PROJECT #8312 BUILDING 35, SMITH HALL  
(ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 2011)

YET SOME IMAGES OF DANZIGER'S INVITE MELANCHOLIC MUSINGS. HARLEM VALLEY/WINGDALE PROJECT #8312, BUILDING 35, SMITH HALL DEPICTS A COUNTER WITH VACANT SEATS IN A DINING FACILITY, ALL FALLEN INTO RUIN. ONE CAN'T HELP CONTRAST THIS IMAGE WITH EDWARD HOPPER'S THE NIGHT HAWKS (O/C 1942). HOPPER'S SCENE OF A MODERN DINER WITH OCCUPANTS TODAY

EVOKES NOSTALGIA, WHEREAS DANZIGER'S SAD RECORD OF A TIME-SMASHED DINER DEVOID OF PEOPLE EVOKES MELANCHOLY. THE PEOPLE WHO ONCE USED THIS FACILITY ARE PRESENT IN THEIR CONSPICUOUS ABSENCE.

GIVEN THE ARTIST'S USE OF SATURATED COLOR AND THE ABSENT-PRESENCES HE EVOKES IN HIS WORK, I WOULD DESCRIBE THE OUTCOME OXYMORONICALLY, AS A SPECTRAL MATERIALISM. JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S DESCRIPTION OF HIS OWN PHOTOGRAPHY SEEMS DESCRIPTIVE OF DANZIGER'S PRACTICE: "I ISOLATE SOMETHING IN ANY EMPTY SPACE AND THEN IT IRRADIATES THIS EMPTINESS — THERE'S THE IRRADIATION OF THE

OBJECT WITHIN THIS EMPTINESS . . . IT IS A KIND OF AUTOMATIC WRITING.” THE RESULTING PRINTS EVOKE A MYSTERY OF AN ENCOUNTER — AN ENCOUNTER NOT UNLIKE THAT RECORDED IN RAINER MARIA RILKE’S NOVEL, THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE (1910), IN WHICH THE PROTAGONIST (A FLÂNEUR ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN) DESCRIBES A RUINED PARISIAN APARTMENT: “THE STUBBORN LIFE OF THESE ROOMS HAD NOT LET ITSELF BE TRAMPLED OUT. IT WAS STILL THERE; IT CLUNG TO THE NAILS THAT WERE LEFT, STOOD ON THE NARROW REMNANT OF FLOORING, CROUCHED UNDER THE CORNER BEAMS WHERE A BIT OF INTERIOR STILL REMAINED. YOU COULD SEE IT IN THE PAINT WHICH IT HAD CHANGED, SLOWLY, FROM YEAR TO YEAR: BLUE INTO MOLDY GREEN, GREEN INTO GRAY, YELLOW INTO A FADED ROTTING WHITE.” COMMENTING UPON THE MANNER IN WHICH MALTE EXPERIENCES THESE RUINS, ERIC L. SANTNER IN ON CREATURELY LIFE (2006) OBSERVES: “THAT EVERYTHING MALTE ‘SEES’ IN THE FACE OF THIS URBAN RUIN ACQUIRES ITS LEGIBILITY IN AN INSTANT BRINGING THIS DISCOURSE OF TRAUMATIC EPIPHANY INTO PROXIMITY TO THE MEDIUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY [MY EMPHASIS].”

THE INSTITUTIONAL SITE DANZIGER HAS PHOTOGRAPHED IS SCHEDULED TO BE REFURBISHED AND TRANSFORMED INTO NEW COMMERCIAL USAGES. SOME OF DANZIGER’S LARGE PRINTS MAY EVEN BE SELECTED TO HANG INSIDE THE NEWLY RECONSTITUTED MULTI-USE CONDO FACILITY WHERE THEY WILL VISUALLY JUSTIFY THE FACILITY’S NEW LEASE ON LIFE. BUT DANZIGER’S WORK ITSELF DOES NOT EXPLICITLY ENGAGE THIS ASPECT OF FUTURE RESURRECTION, BEING MORE FOCUSED ON THE MELANCHOLIC PLEASURES OF MEMORY, ASTUTE FORMAL PLOYS, THE OVERT SEX APPEAL OF DECAY AS ENGENDERED IN HIS USE OF SATURATED COLOR, AND THE IMAGING OF THE OUTMODED AS “PROFANE ILLUMINATIONS” (BASED ON THE NEW GAZE THE SURREALISTS BROUGHT TO MATERIAL CULTURE). JUST AS WALTER BENJAMIN (COMMENTING ON SUCH “ILLUMINATIONS”) NOTED HOW QUICKLY CAPITALIST PRODUCTION TURNED MASS-PRODUCED OBJECTS INTO DETRITUS, DANZIGER’S IMAGES HINT HOW QUICKLY THOSE INSTITUTIONS THEMSELVES BECOME DETRITUS.

THE RESULTING PRINTS IN THIS ONGOING PROJECT ARE MOST, NOT ALL, STUNNING DIGITAL SIMULATIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS OF WHAT WAS BEFORE THE LENS; WHEN NECESSARY, THE LONG-SCALE OF THE SUBJECT MATTER IS COMPRESSED, AND COLOR IS

INTENSIFIED, SO THE FINAL IMAGE RESEMBLES THE “MADENESS” OF ELABORATELY CONSTRUCTED SETS OR OVERTLY MANIPULATED TABLEAUX (THINK OF JEFF WALL’S THE DESTROYED ROOM, 1978) WHICH GIVES SUCH WORK ITS UNCANNY ASPECT. THUS, THE IMAGES HERE DIVERGE FROM MORE CONVENTIONAL APPROACHES TO THIS SUBJECT MATTER BY INTENSIFYING THE “JUDICIOUS MALLETS” TIME HAS WROUGHT, INCARNATING WHAT I’M CALLING A “JUDICIOUS PALETTE OF TIME” FROM WHICH THE ARTIST CAN SELECT TO REALIZE THESE SCINTILLATIONS OF BEING. THESE REALIZATIONS ARE HEREIN COLLECTED (AND WERE RECENTLY EXHIBITED) UNDER THE DEATH-DEFYING TITLE: “SEEKING PERMANENCE.”

THE END