

Accepting the ambiguity of fate in the path of light: Reading the “Ghost House” series of Ohad Matalon

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Upon encountering the “Ghost House” series of Ohad Matalon, the first thing I notice is not the differences across topography between Israel and the northern coast of Taiwan, but the path of light. The direction and path of light is almost a formless actor carrying the reality of each image in these scenes of ruins, with objects gathering dust and memories scattered along the floors. I cannot help but follow them, shifting along in the ruins. The landscape outside is completely masked in white halo, as if dissolved by light, completely washed out. Parts of the images are blurred as if time differences are inserted into these interior spaces, allowing the ruins to seem as if silhouettes salvaged from his memory, the present that we are witnessing with him, wavers, moves and shifts in and out of coherence.

It is not so much that Matalon is trying to remember these scenes, but rather imagining the images he will see in the future as he recalls them, and works on these images in post-production.

The images do not document material reality, but is closer to the process of memory. The “path of light” captured in each image in my interpretation is the light of consciousness as we search for images in our mind. As who can actually recall a clear, sharp, detailed image of a space in retrospect? If one does not have a camera, the spaces we experience often become what Hito Steyerl terms as “poor image”: bad in quality, substandard resolution, while continuing to deteriorate as it accelerates, like the “ghost of an image.” Steyerl goes further in concluding that the image often does not speak to the real thing, but is about “reality.”¹

“Ghost House” in fact pulls from a frequent theme in the field of contemporary art—ruins, to consider the relationship between conceptions of digital photography and reality. The emphasis of photography in the digital era is no

¹ Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” e-fl ux, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>. Accessed 26 October, 2013.

longer on the capacity of the “mechanic eye,” which captures “details that are imperceptible to the human eye.” This ability of realism beyond the human eye was once a defining property of photography, like the author Edgar Allan Poe wrote in his essay on daguerreotypes: If we examine works of art under a microscope, we find that details resembling nature vanish, yet when photographic images are explicitly observed, they seem to reveal a more absolute truth, a perfect identity of the represented object.² “Ghost House” gazes upon the problems of image brought by the digital era without relying on the post-production effects of digital technology; on the contrary, the artist applied special lens which are built for architecture and interior professional photography and deliberately used them in a wrong way, in order to create the partially blurring effects that allow spaces traced with time to distance themselves from the perfection Poe claims, declaring their reproduction of reality, in never being able to represent the ideal.

This series has the power of guiding us to realize that photography in the digital era has already distanced itself from the documentary aesthetic of the “decisive moment,” while the merit of the photographer is no longer dependent on his ability to “shoot” the subject as he would “shoot” as a hunter (noting the same vocabulary in both actions). The artists and critics that praise film may be prone to evaluating the merits of a work on the application of “post-production” or lack thereof, but it is undeniable that digital technicality has pushed us to examine the relationship between photography and reality, artist and machine, which has further developed the field of photography. Nowadays “imprecision” is also an option.

Although the series is captured through the artist’s survey and field study, the images do not record news or documentary, but aim to, as the title “Ghost House” suggests, present the “non-realistic” fate that may be revealed aside from alluded reality through the remained traces of ruins. The photographer is no longer the panting hunter on a quest for truth, but rather a poet circling reality in hopes of finding an angle and a way of assessing reality. Matalon sheds the “gravity” of realistic details in traditional photography, and follows the path of light, accepting the blurring reality that is prevalent in life.

² Edgar Allan Poe, “The Daguerreotype”, *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger* (15 Jan, 1840). For essay, see: http://daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8400008_POE_ALEX-WEEKLY_1840-01-15.pdf. Accessed 26 October, 2013.

