

Genesis 19:24

¹⁵As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city." ¹⁶... "Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. ... ²⁴Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. ²⁵And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

"But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes. People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore." Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*

The dangers of looking back, indeed. Yet here I am, a human. Really, is there any way to not look back? Even if not consciously, our past directs us in the here-and-now, and into the future. So why the imperative to not look back, even if it means being calcified, dissolved into the elements? A little, a good thing; too much, a poison? In today's era of YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, etc., how much is too much? Why all the pictures, why all the looking? What pleasures and what dangers give rise to "voyeurism" (derived from the French, "voir", to see)?

Lot's wife, in looking back, was fixed—as the photograph itself. Prior to today's pervasive digitality, for its first 150-plus years, photography "fixed" reflected light waves onto a surface by means of light-sensitized salts in combination with other elements. Motion fixed as image, time stilled. As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph reveals that "what I see has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred." Not only do photographs contain the certainty of the past, Barthes continues, but, "there is always a defeat of Time in them: that is dead and that is going to die." That we are all going to die is neither surprising nor avoidable.

To be photographed is to be rendered the past as image, fixed, stilled. This is not Lot's wife's crime; it is her looking back at the sight of her former home, everything and everyone she knew at the precipice of disappearing. For this act of looking, her punishment is to be forever stilled. Are we too in danger of being transfixed by looking at photographs as if they were proof of something more than, "what I see indeed existed" (Barthes). Their meaning is dependent upon context, then as now and in the future, presupposed, predetermined, and subject to societal norms and vagaries. To propose that the photograph provides certainty of something more than just that the past existed is to accept its illusion as fact, which is illusory. Whose fact? The past that the photograph captures only exists as...photograph. Its real a real not *the* real.

The photographs in *Time's Assignment* were made between 1997 and early 2008 using a Polaroid technology that stopped being produced in 1997. As Nathalie Herschdorfer so eloquently articulates in her foreword to this collection, I used them to indicate exposure, composition, light's

effects, and other formal cues. Often made over several hours and days, working to resolve a scene into a photograph, I made several exposures that tracked my thinking through the process.

For me, finding the photograph is the task; the adage "taking a picture" anathema to me as I understand and appreciate the medium not as an image-taker, but an image-maker. The material of the picture-making affects what the image "says" just as much as the picture's form and content. A crisp, medium-format, hard-edged lens, and saturated color speak to certain ideas of fashion, beauty, class, and identity; a soft-contrast, blemished, sepia-toned image speaks of history, tradition, and time's passage. We're sophisticated if not fully conscious visual consumers, and subject to a picture's rhetoric. These Polaroids speak of time's passage in their resemblance to images made in earlier times with now anachronistic photographic technologies. They look old, and, relatively, they are, given that technological innovation has progressed with unprecedented rapidity. Too beautiful to be in accordance with their intended obsolescence, I kept them. I remain transfixed; the material effects perfuming the images with an aura of the old and the hand-made makes them all the better because of the irony that they are neither.

Photography's negotiation of control and accident is a long-standing argument. Carried over from painting to photography, in the early 20th century photographers such as the f64 group, sought to legitimize photography as an art by exercising complete control and deliberation, thereby emphasizing the image was made by the photographer rather than by the machine. As modernism spilled into post-modernism, randomness, chance, and accident were attributed value in the artistic process, not necessarily as a new thing, but rather as acknowledgment that this had always been a part of creativity. Photography, in ways different and alike other media, involves a set of artistic decisions and allowances. Rather than repeating what one already knows, artists balance deliberation, contrivance, spontaneity, and accident, allowing for new ideas, knowledge, images, and texts. Personally, I never want to make a picture that I know exactly beforehand.

It has been a real pleasure to work with Nathalie Herschdorfer, who from the moment she saw these images completely understood why I'd held on to them, how they related to my overall and long-term investigation of the still life, and how this genre parallels with the medium of photography itself. Her essay is beautifully nuanced and deeply insightful, exemplary of the close and careful looking and thoughtfulness with which she approaches art. Thanks too to Jennifer Yida Pan for her translation, in which she strove to remain true to the author's intent. Megan Mulry's exquisite editorial skills brought breadth and life to the translated essay, as well. Her calm oversight lent me the same as we worked to bring this book to press. Working with David Chickey is to work with the best, and to become a part of a community of the best. In this, my second book with Radius, I am even more impressed and appreciative of David's focus and sensitivity, making each Radius book a full realization of each artist's work.

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As an artist, working with galleries is certainly a business, but vitally, it is also a friendship as our relationships develop through mutual respect, trust, and enthusiasm. I am happy and proud to work with Yancey Richardson Gallery, Aron Gent and Sibylle Friche of Document, Susanne Breidenbach of galerie m Bochum, Tracey Morgan Gallery, and Joseph Carroll Gallery, as well as Susan Bright whose long-term support is generating a project that sustains us both.

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