

ALTERNATOR

centre for contemporary art

YORK

Interpretive Essay by Katarina Trapara

To “be” is essentially past tense. For a thing to “be” in the first place is for it to have been. For subjects and objects alike, there is a haunting absence of what was the past that has a soul which informs the present. There are centers of spirit in all lost objects that beg us to say “hello,” rather than “good-bye.” Colonialism and, by extension, gentrification are the attempted erasures of this very act of saying “hello” to the past and the destruction of the spirit that lies therein.

Now, enter the *YORK* exhibition. Enter a space where lost fragments of lives can be reclaimed and re-experienced. Enter a space of resistance. Light leaks through decayed curtains and broken voices spill from other rooms; there is vibrant sound in the silence. Cast objects of knives and angels give photographs a physical form that refuse their very own erasure. Larger-than-life silk panels remind us of the importance and subtle power of a chair next to a window. In Lancaster and Switzer’s *YORK*, objects loom in the contested space between past and present, absence and presence.

Questions float in the air, begging the individual to consider the ethical responsibility that lies in the act of witnessing. What does it mean to witness the lives of people who have struggled to claim a personal space, to claim privacy, to claim the very things that are readily denied to them? The structure of the exhibition transforms the spectator into an active participant; one can skip between the silk panels and oat into the photographs, almost stroking lost dishrags, toothbrushes and children’s toys. The silk-framed images give a lingering sense of life to rooms while capturing them in their fading form.

YORK situates time and space in a digital continuum, which enables objects to exist in and of themselves. As such, Lancaster and Switzer tell the stories of individuals in an attempt not to speak for them, nor to appropriate their lived experiences. Instead, they evoke questions. How have minorities and the disadvantaged attempted to exercise autonomy through the establishment of place? What does it mean to “revitalize” this place of agency and privacy through displacement?

The narrative of colonialism bleeds through the process of gentrification, as both entail the theft of land, displacement, and the erasure of the past. However, when art and life are bound together, reconciliation and the act of reclaiming lost narratives become possible. Lancaster and Switzer’s photographs embody the counter-narratives of lives that have been structurally and historically denied. The light that comes from the windows and hits washing machines, mirrors and beds is a haunting presence, which means that it is not altogether lost. Photography, as exhibited by *YORK*, can be a form of resistance that remains within the participant; it has the potential to be embodied, and to escape the realms of the material.



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