

EDGAR MARTINS THIS IS NOT A HOUSE

The US sub-prime mortgage crisis, which has its roots in the closing years of the twentieth century, became apparent in 2007 and exposed pervasive weaknesses as well as deep-rooted inequalities within financial industry regulation and the global financial system. In the winter of 2008, I produced a series of photographs that explored the collapse of the US housing market. I photographed abandoned homes, golf courses, ski resorts, hotels and other building projects in sixteen locations across six separate States. 'This Is not a House' formed part of an assignment for The New York Times Magazine.

When the work was finally published in the summer of 2009, it became the focus of a heated debate as a result of my decision to digitally re-shape a select few images. What was a riveting polemic about deception and misrepresentation for some, was to others the re-surfacing of a tiresome, age-old, ontological, epistemological and moral chasm between Art and Journalism. However, the public reaction to this article, in my view, is better understood and contextualised when, against the backdrop of uncertainty, ruin and bankruptcy, journalistic ethics and woes, one also considers the resonance and imagery of the ruined shelter throughout US history.

According to the author Peter D Osborne (who contributes an essay to the book of the project), America is a "Settler Nation" and so any disaster that involves the shelter or the settlement, "extends immediately into metaphor for a whole historical process." Osborne elaborates: "The history and imagery of the ruined shelter or settlement are required to furnish the continuing epic of travelling and moving on that is the USA, an epic of disasters endured and overcome for sure, but one ever attended by a sense of America's precariousness, of its own brevity, its own uncertainty about where and if it belongs." This is the real context in which 'This Is not a House' appears, the ruins of the house-economy.

I acknowledge that there was a clear misunderstanding concerning the values and rights associated to the creative process which led a renowned publication, such as The New York Times Magazine, to commission a photographic artist without making him fully aware of its own journalistic limits and boundaries. I also acknowledge that digitally altering photographs, in itself, does not pose a problem when presented in a non-indexical context. However, aside from illustration, fashion and the occasional portraiture-based project, how often are social/politically-oriented issues conceptualised and understood outside the scope of the canonical photo-documentary?

Photojournalism has never felt the need to challenge or contravene certain rules, aesthetic or ethical. Yet, within this framework there is a perpetual search, not to mention a real need, to find new ways of assimilating and representing the real.

I viewed this project, from the outset, as a platform to explore new models for conceptualising a particularly contemporary phenomenon and landscape. The work was therefore structured as 'a photographic intervention into a crisis, a crisis that is only in part economic'.

My interest lay in catalysing and reuniting fresh experiences of a new form of American architecture by summoning a disquieting conjunction of realism and fiction. And fiction, as Jacques Rancière argues, is elementary to understanding the real. Bernardo Soares (one of Fernando Pessoa's many pseudonyms) wrote: "some truths cannot be told except as fiction". Perhaps it may also be the case that some truths are better told as 'fiction'. Over time we have accepted the fictions we have constructed as facts, making us the forgotten authors of our own narratives.

It is true that the idea of objective truth may no longer hold in critical theory, but my work has never been about asserting artistic authorship. Photography is a medium built around conceptual tensions and so it offers me a means to bring together irresolvable contradictions. Thus, the houses depicted in this series do not refer just to the particular. They are images of spatial assemblages, of kinds of stages on which a number of quite different (and perhaps incompatible) narratives might be enacted. These images, these buildings, these ruins, reflect back at us the individual constructs and ideas that we project and impose on them.

'This is not a House' emerges precisely at that juncture where clear words falter, where language is disturbed. It hurls us into the antinomies of perception and existence, the exploration of limits and unstable boundaries. After all, the meaning of the world is no longer carried on its surface, if indeed it ever was.

Edgar Martins

'This is not a House', the publication, is available as both a standard and limited edition, published by Dewi Lewis Publishing. The standard edition is published in hardback at £35, ISBN 978-1- 907893-02-5, and is available at the Gallery Shop.

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