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Let Me Show You Something You May Have Missed



The Familiar Made Fresh by Photographer **SEAN PERRY** | *by Robert Faires* p.36

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Let Me Show You Something You May Have Missed

Sean Perry's photographs offer to show you familiar settings in a whole new light **BY ROBERT FAIRES**

Does the world *need* another photograph of Darrell K. Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium? You might not think so. After all, we've seen it so many times in print, on television, and on all manner of collectible memorabilia, not to mention *in life* whenever we pass within a country mile of the 40 Acres, that its colossal concrete features are seared into our cerebellums. It's a structure we know right, left, and center.

Then comes this image: The exterior of the stadium in the dead of night, during a summer storm. The spill from the blazing stadium lights – inexplicably on, as if for a game – illuminates the structure's back and the drizzle falling toward it, setting the night sky aglow. This is obviously the stadium we know, and yet ... it seems recast in stillness, a stillness that accentuates the classical character of its architecture, suggesting a fortress or temple of ancient days as much as a contemporary arena for collegiate sports. And though we associate this place with cheering throngs, an unexpected sense of solitude seems to attend it here. Here's a photograph of this much-photographed structure that whispers of its unseen character, that entices us to look at what we believe we know and see it as if for the first time.

That's the way it is with a photograph by Sean Perry. This 38-year-old image-maker, who divides his time between New York City and Austin, can train his lens on the most familiar settings and come up with a picture strikingly free of old associations and vibrant with discovery. It's particularly evident in his current series, "Transitory," which is being showcased through Oct. 19 at Stephen L. Clark Gallery and in a new limited-edition book from Cloverleaf Press. The photographs focus on abstract architecture and the built environment about Austin, with many of them made from familiar local landmarks: DKR-Texas Memorial Stadium, the Zilker Christmas tree, the Erwin Center, Seaholm Power Plant. Perry doesn't deny these structures whatever iconic power they possess, but he comes at them from an angle that accentuates their geometric qualities: the lines and block and curves within these forms and that play off of the nature surrounding them. And somewhere in there he seems to find a spirit within these inanimate forms that pops to life as he snaps the shutter.

Given the simplicity of the images, one may be tempted to assume that they were simple to create. But no, each image was patiently and painstakingly crafted by Perry with considerable care and time taken to compose the shot, find the ideal light, shoot it, and develop it, with periods along the way for just living with the image to see what can be seen in it. Sean Perry sat down with the *Chronicle* to describe that process in detail, as it related to two specific images in the "Transitory" series.

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Sean Perry: So a couple of years ago, I would be driving around town, and I would see these cell towers or the moon towers or these electrical structures that I just thought were so beautiful, really cool. And the light in Texas I really like a lot. Early morning or late evening is good anywhere, but in Texas, with the big skies and stuff, it would illuminate these structures in a certain way, and they would kind of bloom. For a short period, you would get a sense of these things being alive, and then they'd sort of go back to sleep again. And that's what I wanted to make pictures of. I struggled for a long time because I couldn't really get them. I mean, I was seeing it, and I was feeling it, but I wasn't able to make pictures about it. The first one I made was *Pulse*, the one of the Zilker Christmas tree. There was something about that image that, when I got the film back and saw it, [I knew] there it is. And that image taught me how to make the rest of them. It was about the way the light fell on it and how to shape the light in the camera and then in the darkroom to get that translation with the rest of them.

Austin Chronicle: Did you go to Zilker knowing what about the moon tower you wanted to shoot?

SP: It was about: What is familiar about this that you may have forgotten? A lot of people have made images about the Zilker tree – if you're from Austin, it's a big part of that whole season – but what's something that's familiar about it that kind of blooms as a secret and

"I've gone to places and shot things that are clichés, but is there a secret there? Is there something fresh I can get out of them? You've seen that. You've been around that. But did you notice it this way?"

– Sean Perry

goes away? For me, there's just so much energy under that thing. It becomes a city event, and all the wires and structures of these moon towers, they vibrate and pulse, which is where the name comes from. That's what I felt under it. And I wasn't sure about the angle and which way to abstract it and whatnot, so I just went there and spent time there, walking about.

AC: What time of year?

SP: Right after Christmas, that window between Christmas and New Year's. It was a cloudy day, and I was by myself. It was one of those weird times in the afternoon when no one was there, and the place was very, very still. But there was still all that energy underneath it. Even though I'm alone there, it vibrates; it resonates.



Pulse



Summit

AC: What kind of camera did you use?

SP: It's a Hasselblad. They call it medium format, and it shoots a square, so the negative ends up being 2¼ inches by 2¼ inches. It's a manual camera, so there are no batteries or anything like that. I use the same camera, the same lens, the same film, the same developer – all of that stuff is very standardized. I don't change my tools. By reducing all of my variables that way, it becomes about the image. So when I have problems, it's about *my* problem in getting the image onto the film, not technical issues like, did I have the right lens? Ansel Adams used to say that if you have more than one lens, then you're sure to have the wrong



Sentinel v.2

one [on your camera]. I thought about that for the longest time, and it's true. If it gets to the point where I can't make the image with what I have, then maybe I need to look for something else. But I haven't gotten there yet. If I haven't been able to get it, it's just because I'm not open to it or I'm not finding it.

AC: How many shots did you take of the tree?

SP: Maybe 24. But before I made that image, there were other places that I had been photographing before Christmas, and I'd gone through dozens of rolls and just not had anything. I mean, they were OK – I was shooting some of the cranes for construction and some

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Reciprocity

electrical towers as you're heading out toward the "Y" – but they were kind of flat. They just didn't have any magic in them. I was just kind of documenting the towers. *Pulse* was the first one that, when I got up underneath and was able to get that thing in the frame that way, all of a sudden there it was.

AC: You had a sense of that ...?

SP: Underneath it? (Guardedly) Yeaahhh ... I mean, you never know.

AC: You had a hunch?

SP: Yeah. You get a hunch. There's this thing that happens when you're making images that's like a bell curve, where you recognize that something is there, something's happening, and you work through it and work through it, and it starts to increase, and it increases, then it crests, and then it starts to go back the other way, where you're losing it and it's going back to sleep or you're repeating yourself. Sometimes you get it, sometimes you don't. One of the things I like about film is: I don't know right away. Because there's that lag time in the manual process of loading the film, unloading the film, developing the film, doing the contact sheets, looking at them later. If I was shooting that stuff digitally, I would see it right away and then make judgments. I don't work that way. A lot of times, what I'll do is I'll make images and run the film, and I won't look at it right away. It'll be a couple of weeks before I look at it. Or I'll make five or six small prints from the contact sheets and tack them up around my desk or around my bed, and I'll live with them for a little while before I go in the darkroom. I don't go in the darkroom right after I've made images. It'll be months before I print them sometimes. Because there are things there I haven't learned yet, things I haven't seen about it yet. I give myself room to be surprised.

AC: How long before you went in the darkroom with *Pulse*?

SP: Probably six months. It was a long time. I saw it on the contact sheet, and then I kept making other images. From a technical standpoint, it was about time of day and backlighting these things in a certain way, placing the sun in a position to get the shadows to wrap forward. That was the secret of that image. It started by silhouetting these things, and the trick became



Sea of Tranquility

– and this is more the technical side – holding information and holding detail in the shadows. It's easy to silhouette something when you put the light behind it, but the tricky part is, can you do that and still hold something in it so you want to look into the shadows? A lot of how I print and what the experience of seeing my prints is about is getting lost in the detail in the shadows. There are secrets in there, and that's what I work for.

AC: So what happened in the darkroom?

SP: It becomes about preserving that feeling. Can the print represent how I felt? So if the thing has all this energy and resonates, I need to make a print that translates that to someone who wasn't there or didn't share that experience. That was the challenge. I want to make light a three-dimensional object. A lot of what my photographs are about is giving light viscosity. When you look at the prints, I want it so you almost can't tell if light is being reflected off of them or coming out of them. That's hard. I spend a lot of time in the darkroom on that, but when I get it, there's a certain amount of magic to it.

AC: How long did it take to get a print that had that energy to it?

SP: I usually give myself a day with a negative. If I go in at 8 or 9 in the morning and get something by lunch, then it's a good day. And if it's midnight before I get something, that's fine, too. I stay until I finish. [With *Pulse*], I made a series of prints of it and ended up tearing those up and going back a second time. So that particular image took two days. The first ones were good, but they just didn't burst. They didn't quite have the resonance that the thing had.

AC: You say you want the print to communicate the feeling you had to someone who wasn't there that day. Who do you show the prints to in order to test that out?

SP: John Christensen, who is a sculptor here in Austin. He's a mentor and one of my dearest friends, and he loves me enough to tell me the truth. And that's such a rare thing. Lots of people will encourage you, or they'll say, "that's great" or "that's good" or "that's nice," and as an artist, that stuff's useless. I am much more suspect of compliments than criticism. I much more prefer criticism. I can handle criticism. Compliments scare the hell out of me.



Diapason

I know [John] cares about me as a person, so what he says to me as an artist, there is no filter of he doesn't want to hurt my feelings. It's brutal, and I adore that about him.

AC: Did he have anything to say about *Pulse*?

SP: He nodded, like I was on to something.

AC: Has he seen other images from the series?

SP: Oh yeah, and he's very quick to point out when I have or haven't hit the mark. I have nowhere to hide when I show him stuff. He'll say, "You're wandering here," or "I don't think you've quite gotten to it here."

When I was doing my first show, years ago, he was talking about [the pictures] and said, "One of the things about your photographs is that they say to me, 'Let me show you something you may have missed.'" And I hadn't realized it, but that is sort of the theme of these things. I'm right on that line of clichés. I've gone to places and shot things that are clichés, but is there a secret there? Is there something fresh I can get out of them? You've seen that. You've been around that. But did you notice it this way? I don't have any truths. You know, they always say artists show people truths. I don't have any answers or truths. [My work is] about reminding you of something you already knew. It's about something that's familiar.

AC: That may be a great way to segue into talking about the stadium, which, if there's a structure that people in this town know, that's it, and yet the feeling from your image of it is very distinct from the postcard image of Memorial Stadium.

SP: I spend a lot of time in Austin, and I walk a lot, or I'll just grab my camera and go for drives and try to get lost, you know. And I've walked around the stadium or been around that area a lot. There are a lot of interesting structures on campus, like the big air-conditioning units that are lit up at night and have steam coming off them, so I'll drive through there as opposed to going up Guadalupe. I was heading north and cut through the campus. It was about, I don't know, 2 or 2:30 in the morning. It was late July or early August, so the season hadn't started or anything like that, but all the [stadium] lights were on. And a storm was blowing through, where the clouds were moving by really fast. Very surreal. It was one of those things where I'd been working late; I'd been in the dark-

room; I was tired. All I really wanted to do was eat some cereal and go to bed. But I had to go back. So I went home, I got the camera, I got some plastic, and I came back and made images in the rain for an hour or so. I shot maybe three or four rolls. The first roll or the second is where that image comes from. It's one of the few images that I shot with a tripod. Everything else is hand-held, just me walking around. And the exposure – I didn't have any way to meter it, so I was guessing: 10 seconds, 20 seconds, 30, ... yeah maybe. That's why the clouds are trailing.

The titling of it, *Revelation*, and the idea of lights coming on or the duality of "am I inside or outside?" – I'm not thinking about them when I'm there. I'm thinking about: "Is the camera dry? This looks cool." I'm just hanging out by myself. Then later I can look at them and see what was going on, where I was emotionally or psychologically. Your work will teach you things about yourself, if you're open to it. There are things in there that you can't always keep track of or like in your subconscious that you don't know, and that's my favorite part of what I do: It teaches me things that I can't get to in other ways. And I don't think it's unique to photography. It happens with anything, because it's an expression of something that's inside of you.

It's kind of like making a good song. When you hear a great song, it's visceral. You don't know the words to it; you don't know where the arrangement's going; you just know that there's something in it that's grabbing hold of you. Then, as you spend more time with it, you start to learn that's what the lyrics are, and that's what the story is, and there are these different layers. That's what happens with my images. There are all kinds of themes that are running in them – man and the built environment and issues of communication and struggles within relationships and all this stuff that goes on inside of me – but those aren't the things I hit people over the head with. They're there if you're interested, but as a visual language, I make them more visceral. I want them to be beautiful first and foremost, and if that grabs you, then as you look, those things are underneath. ■

"Transitory" is on display through Oct. 19 at Stephen L. Clark Gallery, 1101 W. Sixth. For more information, call 477-0828.