

PRESS COVERAGE



Guy Tillim: Avenue Patrice Lumumba

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3. Time Out, 2.4.2011

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African avenues of broken dreams

By Lori Waxman, Special to the Tribune

February 18, 2011

In the 20th century, modernist architects filled the world's cities with streamlined structures built of poured concrete and rebar, surfaced with neat, repeating geometric forms. You know these kinds of buildings. They're everywhere — the gleaming office tower downtown, the modest public library around the corner, the decrepit housing project best avoided.

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They're also all over post-colonial Africa, however incongruous that might seem. A sleek, futuristic post office stands in Likasi. A rhythmic, sprawling hotel grandstands in Beira. A tidy, smart university inspires in Lubumbashi. An inventive, asymmetric apartment complex intrigues in Quelimane.

Or, that is, they used to. These buildings and countless others like them remain standing, but they were long since abandoned by the French, Portuguese and Belgian powers that built them. And while architecture might seem timelessly sturdy, it's not. Modern architecture in particular demands care in order to maintain appearances.

And nothing has been very kind to these buildings — not time, not climate, certainly not politics or poverty. The same factors that have troubled the citizens of Francophone and Lusophone Africa since their various stories of liberation began in the late 1950s have beleaguered their architecture and infrastructure too.

All of which makes them the perfect subject for South African artist Guy Tillim. Tasked with documenting the legacy of colonialism, the former photojournalist turned his camera on the aging modernist remains of Angola, the Congo, Madagascar and Mozambique. The resulting photographs are on view in a contemplative, sensitive solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

Tillim tackles his subjects modestly, from office to office, facade to facade, block to block. Though a few of his images have the breathtaking appeal of so much recent architectural photography, most of them are printed large so that their decrepit details can be paid attention to rather than revealed in.

Details like the filthy windows and stained drop ceilings, fallen shelves and dying office plants at City Hall in Lubumbashi. Or the rusted filing cabinets, worn desk chairs and old rubber stamps at the Department of Commerce in Antsiranana.

Nearly every governmental, educational and administrative office that Tillim pictures is not just falling apart, but literally bereft of all but the most basic necessities for doing work. Exceptions merely prove the rule — the rotary phone, airmail envelope and paperbacks that clutter a desktop at the University of Lubumbashi are so out of date as to seem frozen in time.

And just forget about computers. The single piece of digital technology on view anywhere is a cell phone held by a high school student, who casually checks it in front of a school building riddled with broken windows.

Forget about stuff in general. New stuff, cool stuff, basic stuff, necessary or unnecessary — there's a total lack of commodities and tools of any sort. Even the science classroom at the university is empty.

How does anyone get anything done?

The decrepitude continues on and on. A playground in the center of Gabela provides a swing set without swings, a carousel without seats and a lawn overgrown with weeds and rubbish. A blackened concrete apartment building in Beira features storefronts all shuttered and gated.

Architectural and infrastructural disasters lurk everywhere. And dull architecture too. Occasional bits of design appeal — the square concrete windows that jut like blocks off the front of an apartment building in Quelimane — but while these might appeal in Norway, here, they look arbitrary and firebombed.

But not uninhabited ... not exactly. People aren't much in evidence in Tillim's photographs. A handful of bureaucrats and students make an appearance, but mostly, he keeps humans at a distance, in the shadows or at the edge of the frame.

And yet, humans inhabit the majority of the pictured structures, and they leave traces behind. A former Belgian Colonial Bank building in Kolwezi appears barren and unused, but the pink and gold towel hanging on a line inside suggests otherwise. The same goes for the Grande Hotel in Beira, stripped down to a gaunt concrete shell but clearly serving as home to hundreds, who hang their laundry out to dry on its railings and send their kids out to play in its rain- and litter-filled pool.

Unlike most of the buildings Tillim photographs, the Grande Hotel retains a certain grandeur. It's the splendor of the ruin, pictured so romantically by less-restrained photographers in such complex, troubled places as post-Katrina New Orleans and exotically downtrodden Havana. The stink and sadness of decay, it seems, don't translate onto photo paper. Even fatally waterlogged wreckage can be made beautiful with the right lighting and lens.

To his credit, Tillim avoids this aestheticization of disaster. With the exception of the Grande Hotel and a strikingly retro-stylish shot of the Kolwezi sports club library, his pictures don't make you want to visit the places they depict. They don't render peeling plaster seductively, and they won't be appearing in Wallpaper magazine any time ever. They're not hard to look at, not quite, but neither do they let you forget that what you're seeing is very real, and quietly tragic.

"Guy Tillim: Avenue Patrice Lumumba" runs through March 6 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan Ave., 312-663-5554, mocp.org

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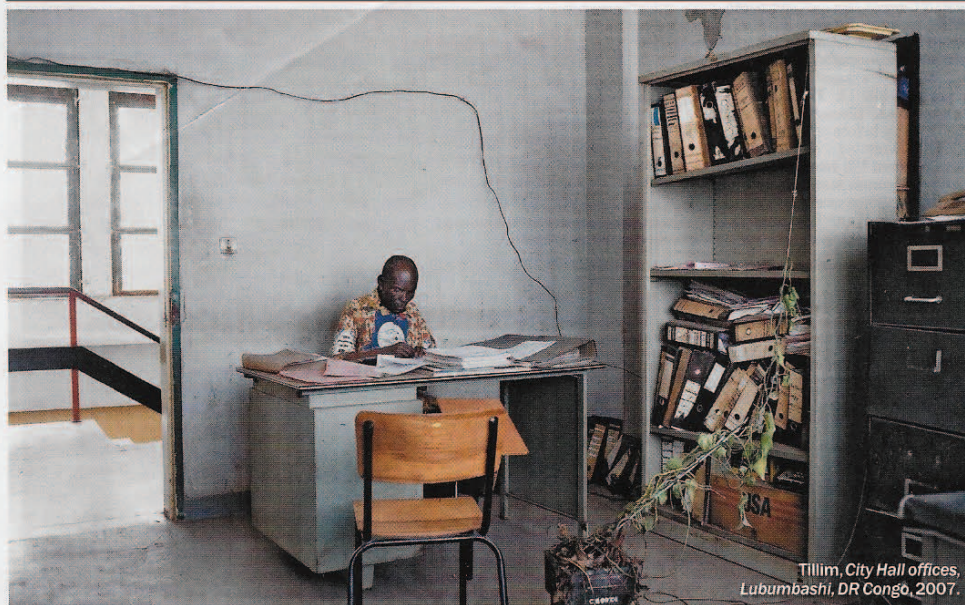
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Art & Design

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Art & Design

Reviews



Tillim, *City Hall offices, Lubumbashi, DR Congo, 2007.*

“Guy Tillim: Avenue Patrice Lumumba”

★★★★★

Museum of Contemporary Photography, through Mar 6 (see Museums & Institutions).

Guy Tillim began his career by photographing the effects of apartheid in South Africa. Since then, the white native of Johannesburg, now 49, has documented conflicts in Africa for wire agencies, magazines and newspapers. His images of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo or famine victims in Malawi don't fit neatly into the disaster narratives that shape American stereotypes of the continent, however. They're too still, too dignified or too out of context to tug at our heartstrings.

“Avenue Patrice Lumumba” (2007–08) won't inspire donations, either. The series explores the decaying modernist architecture built by the colonial and postcolonial regimes of Angola, the DRC, Madagascar and Mozambique. Its title refers to the streets that various African cities named after the DRC's first prime minister, who was assassinated in 1961 just weeks after his first term began. Those streets “have come to represent the loss of an African dream,” MoCP curator Karen Irvine writes in her exhibition statement.

Yet Tillim's photos bear little resemblance to the kind of “ruin porn”

that's come to represent Detroit. The artist avoids the spectacle of great buildings gone to seed, with the exception of Beira, Mozambique's Grande Hotel—a vast concrete structure inhabited by squatters, who hang their laundry out to dry on its curving balconies. The hotel—which has trees growing out of it—might be unrecognizable to those who opened it in 1954, hoping to attract wealthy white tourists, but it's still bustling. Only a couple of photos, such as *Park in the center of town, Gabela, Angola* (2008), which depicts a desolate Toyota showroom and a playground overgrown with weeds, come off as postapocalyptic.

The lack of gloom in Tillim's work stems from his ability to balance rust, trash, peeling paint and broken windows with the reality of bureaucrats, students and other citizens going about their daily lives, adapting or ignoring the buildings crumbling around them. The man working at his desk in *City Hall offices, Lubumbashi, DR Congo* (pictured, 2007) seems unaware, at least for the moment, that his plant is about to eat his collapsing bookcase. A lonely outdoor sculpture of Angola's first president, *Buste of Agostinho Neto, Gabela, Angola* (2008), has a surreal air—perhaps because Neto's bespectacled metal head looks too big

for his shoulders—but viewers must divide their attention between Neto's memorial and what appears to be a busy gas station behind it.

Irvine quotes Tillim's wish that “Avenue Patrice Lumumba” not become “some sort of Havana-esque vision.” Here, the artist doesn't entirely succeed. Almost no technology indicates that these scenes set in midcentury modernist public buildings aren't taking place in the '50s and '60s. No one has a computer. The furniture could be decades-old castoffs from American offices, and yellowing binders and files fill every bookshelf. In *Typists, Likasi, DR Congo* (2007), a calendar advertising cell phones hangs above a woman hunched over an ancient typewriter. (Other photos reveal it's not the only typewriter still in use.)

Tillim's gaze can be so dispassionate that it's unclear what his subject is, especially when people are absent. One can't tell whether the focus of *Private residence, Kohvezi, DR Congo* (2007) is the barely visible house's yard or something specific on that unkempt patch of land, and the composition is too dull for us to care. But the remarkable details in most images—tiny but telling—piece together a different picture of Africa from the one we usually see.—Lauren Weinberg

Stas Orlovski

★★★★★

“Echoes,” Peter Miller Gallery, through Feb 19 (see Galleries, West Loop).

A disembodied eyeball blossoms from a delicate wildflower. A thick cluster of blooms obscures a grayish-blue human foot. Whimsical images recur in Stas Orlovski's mixed-media collages: Hairy human heads poke halfway out of bodies of water as though they're islands; songbirds are accompanied by tiny musical notes.

The Moldova-born, L.A.-based artist creates a mood at once somber and fantastical, romantic and portentous in these meticulous arrangements, which he made from 2000–06. Combining techniques such as watercolor, charcoal drawing, Xerox transfer and silverpoint, Orlovski references Russian folklore, Persian miniatures, Japanese woodcuts and Dutch botanical drawings. The show's earlier compositions are almost too tidy, but he adds interest by covering his canvases with thin handmade paper that reveals every stain and smudge. The aforementioned *Garden with Foot* (2002) produces the effect of wallpaper in a creepy Victorian nursery: We expect its yellowed paper and dull blooms to give off a whiff of decay.

Orlovski combines his techniques to masterful effect in *Small Sculpture Garden with Rain* (2006). “Echoes” contains quite a few larger works on canvas, but this 24” x 24” collage is the most textural, layering abstract ink scribbles and long, vertical lines depicting rainfall—like those in Hiroshige's *Sudden Shower on Ohashi Bridge*—over cutouts of broken statuary and a column by Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi. Framed by dark clouds, the scene is captivating and mysterious—in the realm between dream and nightmare.—Laura Pearson



Orlovski, *Flies, 2000.*



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