

What Remains

Barbara Diener, Pao Houa Her, Jon Rafman, Lieko Shiga

January 26—March 22 | Main Gallery



Barbara Diener

Fire, 2012. Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy of the artist

Displacement—losing access to the places where one feels instinctively at home—is to become adrift in an unending negotiation between one’s past and present selves. In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” writer and literary theorist Edward Said describes the sorrow of being estranged from one’s home country as an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place.” Displacement, he writes, is a perpetual state in which one is “torn from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography.”¹

Exploring displacement as one of the most unsettling of human experiences, the exhibition *What Remains* features four contemporary artists who contend with the psychic and physical aftermath of dislocation. In photography and video projects, these artists suture memories into their present narratives, expressing their individualized experiences of living with a fractured identity—one that must encompass geographies and cultures separated by space and time in one unified self. Inherent in each artist’s process is a search for continuity. Therefore, their work simultaneously considers both personal backstory and the social geography of the communities, subcultures, or families in which they currently live. Negotiating parallel worlds, these artists metaphorically inhabit a multiplicity of places that could never coexist in reality, but which find expression in photographic representation.

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Barbara Diener

Smoke, 2012. Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy of the artist

In her series *Sehnsucht* (2012–14), **Barbara Diener** (German, b. 1982) combines photography’s unique capacity to render the world in high detail with the medium’s ability to reveal complex human stories that lie beneath those surfaces. The project’s title is a German word for an unfulfilled and unattainable desire. With no English equivalent, it describes “one of life’s longings, for someone or something, that cannot be fully defined and will not be realized.” The title encapsulates Diener’s experience as a German immigrant who moved to the United States in early

adulthood. Initially motivated by her longing for rootedness and the comfort of home, she began photographing in rural towns throughout Illinois that reminded her of her hometown in Germany. Those first pictures spurred Diener’s long-term photographic investigation of the complex meaning of “home” and the human need to feel deeply connected to a particular place. Her work is at once an examination of her own complicated identity and a document of the communities she encounters as she travels and photographs. Diener’s longing for the incomparable comfort of a place she can no longer access, only recollect, informs her understanding of a rural way of life found here in the United States, the spiritual and emotional undercurrents of which resonate in her photographs.

Also drawn to rural communities and the way of life they contain, artist **Lieko Shiga** (Japanese, b. 1980) began her project *Rasen Kaigan* (2008–12) as she traveled across Japan in search of a new place to live and make work and came across the city of Kitakama, a small coastal city in Miyagi Prefecture. Of the 107 farming families that lived there, most were related and had spent generations on the land. Shiga was drawn to the customs and traditions of the aging community. “I’m not going anywhere,” the residents would tell her as she took their portraits and recorded their oral histories. Shiga shared a deep



Lieko Shiga

From the series *Rasen Kaigan*, 2008-12. Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy of the artist

sensibility with them—with their physical and psychological ties to the land—becoming the official photographer of Kitakama. Mid-project, the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami devastated the coastal town, which lies just north of Fukushima Prefecture geographically. Many possessions and personal photographs, including Shiga's, were washed along the shore or otherwise lost at sea. *Rasen Kaigan* would change dramatically at this time, ultimately depicting the surreal, postapocalyptic vision of a real place and populace who have endured unthinkable tragedy. Informed by the question of what it means to no longer be able to live in one's home, Shiga continued to photograph Kitakama, documenting the place as a lived reality in the shadows of its former way of life.

Jon Rafman's (Canadian, b. 1981) video *Codes of Honor* (2011) also laments the effects of a dismantled physical place on a community. A video game enthusiast, Rafman spent years interviewing highly competitive gamers at the East Coast's storied video game arcade, Chinatown Fair Arcade. CF, as it was often called by its patrons, was forced to close its doors in 2011 under financial pressures and rising rent. The loss of this venue marked

the dismemberment of a community of gamers who regularly faced off in head-to-head combat. *Codes of Honor*, which is in part inspired by Rafman's time at CF, blends video footage of interviews with pro-gamers, scenes from classic video games, and architecture and characters from virtual worlds. Partly fictional, partly autobiographical, the piece presents vivid accounts of pro-gamers' most intense gaming experiences, as a narrator reflects on his loss of purpose, camaraderie, and achievement since giving up pro-gaming. By calling attention to the dominance of online virtual worlds, which have all but replaced traditional arcades, the video explores the difficulties and possibilities of finding connection to others and a unified sense of self in the contemporary, technologically driven present.

Pao Houa Her's (Hmong-American, b. 1982) work navigates the duality of her Hmong-American identity. A refugee from Laos, Her moved to the United States with her family in 1987, celebrating their first Christmas in Minnesota over a traditional American turkey dinner. Years later, Her would ask her mother about this uprooting. "We came here so that you wouldn't have to live the life we lived," her mother replied.²



Jon Rafman
Codes of Honor, 2011. HD video. 13:29. Courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery, New York



Pao Houa Her
Rabbit with Doll, 2009. Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy of the artist

Her's photographs are in part an attempt to recover aspects of the life her parents left behind as she explores her own divided experience as an American immigrant. Working across styles, from still lifes to color portraits of her family, self, and community in the Twin Cities, where there is a sizable population of Hmong immigrants, the artist creates a photographic space for the synthesis of cultures. Motivated by desires to belong and to be recognized, Her uses the camera to delve into the world of Hmong veterans who fought for the CIA during the Vietnam War, but who received no official recognition, and that of mail-order brides whose heavily Photoshopped pictures conform to ideals of beauty rooted in Western cultures. Questions of personal and cultural identity find their ephemeral answers in Her's photographs, where Hmong and American ways of life intersect.

Set against volatile political, economic, and natural forces of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the works of these four artists explore feelings of displacement and loss that ring true for many of us, as we struggle to live lives of self-knowledge and intimacy in an increasingly global society. Their works also ponder the universal human desire to narrate one's identity, as they reveal the limits of our ability to frame our multifaceted selves for both personal understanding and outward expression.

—Allison Grant, Assistant Curator

1. Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 137.
2. Pao Houa Her, artist statement, *Coming Off the Metal Bird*, accessed December 17, 2014. http://www.ahornmagazine.com/issue_6/solo_pao_houa/solo_pao_houa.html.