



T R A N S P O S I T I O N S

THEOLOGY, IMAGINATION AND THE ARTS

BY DAN DRAGE / EXHIBITION REVIEWS, PHOTOGRAPHY

EXHIBITION REVIEW: *HOME ALONE TOGETHER*



Editor's Note: Dan Drage also interviewed Aaron Rosen, one of the curators of the *Home Alone Together* exhibition, about the origins and goals of the project. You may read their conversation [here](#).

‘**T**ogether’ is a word which carries unusually poignant resonances right now in the midst of a global pandemic. The fact that churches worldwide forewent assembling for celebrations of Pentecost—that day of great gathering together of God’s Spirit and the nations—serves as a case-in-point for our situation. The account of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2

reads all-the-more strangely now, with gatherings small and large currently seeming as unusual to us as those 'cloven tongues like as of fire' in verse 3 (KJV). And while we're quick to remark on the marvelous ways technology bridges the gap, in fact we are still, most of us, alone in some form or other. It need not be argued the internet serves as an invaluable tool for connecting people and ideas, and though I'm far from listing Zoom as another symbol for the Holy Spirit, I would be hard-pressed to suggest I don't value screen-time with loved ones or my daily news survey. Yet this very screen, this window of glass and magic, can also heighten my sense of loneliness. The internet, via that glossy magic window, may be the most disembodied context for us humans to be 'together'. I confess my initial skepticism, then, that such a space could serve artists trying to make human connections through their work.

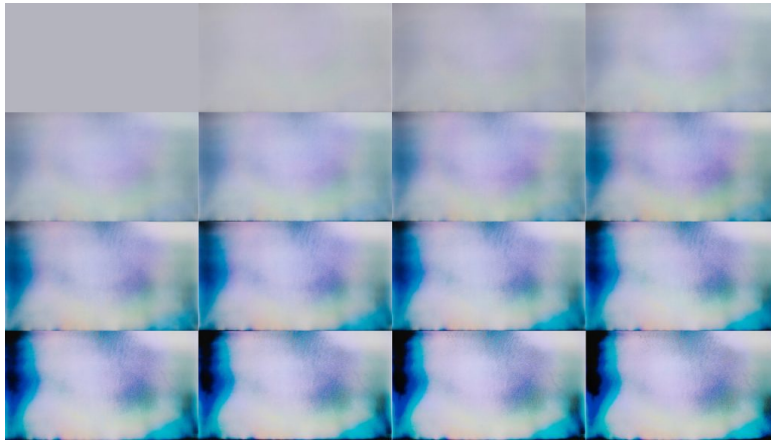
In their current exhibition hosted by the journal *Image*, however, curators Dr. Aaron Rosen and S. Billie Mandle have managed to weave just such a context. The framework in which the curators have formed this context—allowing us to view the works according to space, time, or artist—can help us to consider questions about its potential for hierophany or, as Rosen and Mandle put it, to 'be more prepared to encounter transcendence, even—perhaps especially—in the mundane'. Toward such an encounter, the curators have invited twenty-five artists from around the world to photograph from their homes, thus reflecting on their own creative process and life in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic's restrictions, and increasingly also viewing the struggles sparked by racism. What might these artists show us as we consider time, each week of the exhibition building on the last? Or how might our thoughts on space be opened to the transcendent as we compare the mundanity of the various rooms in their houses? Bachelard, that patron saint of domestic spaces, must naturally be evoked here, for it is in his idea of the house as shelter for daydreaming, as protector for the dreamer, that we may be freed to view our internal space not as a confinement but as a source of wonder and inspiration. [1]

As a space, the internet is placeless—where or whether it exists in the physical universe does not matter. It is a *Wunderkammer*, full of bits of information detached from their origins, placed alongside other equally detached bits of information in a kind of digital zoo. Thankfully, Rosen and Mandle have chosen to shape their exhibition in a way honest to the flat, virtual nature of the internet as medium—photography. As Bachelard speaks to the domestic space, so speaks Sontag to photography when she suggests that ‘photography is the paradigm of an inherently equivocal connection between self and world’. Whether self or world, Sontag goes on, ‘one side or the other of the connection is always being rediscovered and championed’. [2] It is perhaps these qualities of ambivalent reflection and rediscovery—at which photography excels—which allow the artists the means to courageously share their worlds with us. Not all the artists represented here are photographers by profession: painters, sculptors, and others also take up the lens here. Says Rosen, ‘Billie and I thought of just inviting photographers to join this exhibition, and that would have made a lot of sense. But while we knew we wanted the product to be photographic, we thought it’d also be really interesting to see through the eyes of artists who normally work in various other media’. Aware of the impact of the lockdown on artists, Rosen continues, they recognized that ‘many artists are cut off from their studios and normal materials, so photographs (in some cases taken just through a mobile) allow many more artists to record and process their experiences creatively’. [3] Conceding for the moment, therefore, the question of the internet as space for art, I want to focus instead on the potential for these particular works, these particular artists, to act as mirrors reflecting back a sacredness in our own domestic, artistic lives.

Belden Lane, in an essay on sacred space, enlists two pairs of Greek words which might serve to enrich our viewing of the *Home Alone Together* exhibition: the first pair describing place, *topos/chora*, and the second, *kairos/chronos*, exploring time. Lane writes of *topos* as ‘a mere location, a measurable, quantifiable point, neutral and indifferent’, as opposed to *chora*, that mysterious ‘energizing force, suggestive to the imagination, drawing intimate connections to everything else in our lives’. [4]

Likewise, 'time as *chronos*', according to Lane, 'is perceived as the repetitive ticking of the clock, every second precisely equal to the next. But time as *kairos* is an unrepeatable moment when events of great significance come to be gathered in the life of an individual or a people. To experience oneself simultaneously in a situation of *chora* and a moment of *kairos* is truly to encounter wonder'. [5] If, as Sontag suggests, 'the photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time', might we be able to see *chora* in these places, or experience *kairos* in these moments? [6]

Navigating 'room by room', as the exhibition allows, we can choose to explore the living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, online, studio, or outside. Such a framework offers not only the challenge of Bachelard's wonder (how to interestingly photograph a bathroom, say, or the computer screen— need I go back to that topic?) but has the virtue of being immediately relatable. There is a strange double-sense we get when seeing another's space which is similar to ours; it is one of recognition alongside a (currently refreshing) sense of difference and variation. Thus clicking on perhaps the most mundane room of all, I see photos of tiles and toilet paper, of self-cut hair in the tub, all easily recognizable. Similarly, heading 'online', I see screen shots of posts, the familiar blue glow, an overabundance of rectangles, images of challenging news. Yet in even these rooms, over and around the everyday these artists have elicited a sense of *chora*: of connection, of wonder, of pathos. As a flattened, digital subject, 'online' seems the most challenging to me. Yet Todd Forsgren successfully managed to turn the rectangular constraints into inspiration for his multiple contributions to this 'room': 'Virtual' (April 18, 2020), which plays with a recurring blur series like so many group chats; 'Views from 81 Friends' Rooms' (April 27, 2020), which is a compilation whose depth of meaning comes through simply in the title; and another tell-all title, 'Dark Skies: A collection of 100 Makeshift Black Squares from Instagram's BlackOutTuesday' (June 4, 2020).



Todd Forsgren, 'Virtual'

Forsgren's regular photographic practice peeks through these works, especially his fascination with observational photos of found patterns. These particular pieces exemplify several notable elements of the exhibition as a whole. Firstly, one encounters works of creative juxtaposition or abstraction (see especially the black-and-white work of Jahanzeb Haroon and Dua Abbas, the husband-and-wife team known as Gol Kamra), which suggest the artist is finding inspiration from within the limitations without being fixated on those limitations. Another element represented here is that of relationship, of series, of continuity with one's own work over the weeks contrasting with or balancing against the works of others. Hannah Smith Allen's ongoing series of 'Every Window in My House', for example, or Michael Takeo Magruder's embarkation on a week-by-week pairing of 'records': one online 'virtual record', superimposing images of headlines and ever-increasing worldwide virus-related deaths, and the other a 'physical record', consisting of blurred images of himself moving through that particular room. There is in these a nod to *chronos*, to the second-hand ticking by, even as they point to something more.

**Hannah Smith Allen, 'Every Window in my House, Brooklyn
(Three Months After)'**

Many other images serve as meditations on the present, with photo-journalist or even art-therapy qualities, and utilize the art form as social commentary. I find several of these to be quite powerful works in this moment of history, as they grapple with quarantine and issues of race. Joyce Yu-Jean Lee's 'Grocery Ghost' (April 23, 2020)—white nylon grocery sacks waiting just over the threshold of the flat, red 'EXIT' sign blazing in the hall beyond—is so utterly quotidian except for its accompanying date. One can make out a repetition of 'Thank You' on the bags: even as we wish we could exit, we're grateful for this ghost. Following May 25, other commentaries can be seen, from marches and graffiti to quieter memorial images. One powerful photograph taken by Barbara Takenaga of the IFC Center, an art house movie theater in Greenwich Village, speaks volumes. Text abounds here, and the eye reads back and forth, picking up more each time: 'Black Lives Matter' in

corporately-approved marquee is superseded by the same message spray-painted across the boarded-up doors. More symbols emerge, from the two street sign arrows—‘ALL TRAFFIC’ and ‘ONE WAY’—to the red hand warning against walkers crossing. One sign speaks, ‘become an ICF member and save’— some in, some out, some saved, some not. Next, I notice the colour scheme and line of the image, with a dominating black-and-red in a grid of right angles, sliced through with the gentle curve of a traffic light post. In a moment of shock, of condemning self-recognition, only after studying this image for some time did I see the obscure figure of a person sitting in the shadows. Post-May 25, all of Janna Ireland's submissions for this exhibition take on a new dimension of meaning. Having included her two young sons in each of her images, she commented recently on Image's Facebook page, ‘The challenges of raising black children in a country that has been traditionally hostile to them has been an underlying theme of the work’. Initially I had only noticed the emotions of *all* childhood in her images; now I'm moved by these as *black* childhoods, and I'm invited to join Ireland and her husband in concern for these boys' futures in a way I haven't felt for my own two white daughters.

Barbara Takenaga, ‘Outside, Week 10, June 12, 2020’

More needs to be said of each work here, of each artist, their stories, their courage to persevere in making in the midst of lockdown and lost lives. Visitors to the site may view the works according to artist as well as by room or

time, which allows a glimpse of each artist's style as well as of his or her life. Although each story and place is unique, one can relate to so many of these images. We are, after all, together in this particular time, on this particular planet we call home. A screen-based virtual experience cannot fully replace or replicate a material, multi-sensorial, embodied one. And yet, there is currently in my home a window which looks out into the lives of so many generous artists. I am not alone, and together with these gracious folk I am invited to experience wonder.