

Lifeworks

Overexposure: the Chernobyl photographs of David McMillan

On April 26, 1986, an accident at the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl, in north-central Ukraine, released 200 times the radiation produced by the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and forced the evacuation of 135 000 people from the surrounding area. To date, over 11 000 cases of thyroid cancer have been reported since the disaster. The contamination of the soil and food chain in the evacuation zone is anticipated to persist until the year 2135; former residents are permitted to return — to visit one another, and to tend graves — once a year.

Winnipeg photographer David McMillan has visited the Chernobyl evacuation zone six times since 1994, recording the solitary decay of this modern Pompeii in a series of images that now form part of the permanent collection of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa.

In the 19th century, the art theorist John Ruskin described the aesthetic category of the “picturesque.” Picturesque

art typically dwelled on charming rustic scenes that had the attributes of age, ruggedness and decline. Ruskin considered the picturesque a suspect genre, for

it indulged a “delight in ruin” that allowed the viewer to suspend any concern for the human implications of a scene. McMillan’s photographs call to



Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography

David McMillan. *Nursery School Classroom, Pripyat, October, 1997*



Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography

David McMillan. *Interior of Railroad Station, Village of Janov, November, 1996*

mind Ruskin's critique of the picturesque in that, despite the tragic ruin they record, their most noticeable attribute is beauty. Many are interiors: paint peels in enormous flakes from walls, and despite the terrifying meaning of this decay, the eye luxuriates in the softly saturated turquoises and greens with which these rooms were once so optimistically decorated. Some are infused with a pearly light pouring in sideways from windows; others, facing a window head-on, are flooded with a glare that obliterates everything beyond — an overexposure that is more metaphorical than technical.

Of course, this work shares more with documentary photography than with Victorian notions of beauty. Found objects provide ample scope for political critique: one image records an incomplete arrangement of flags on a wall, vestiges of a dismantled Soviet Union; in another, a shattered portrait of Lenin stands among the debris of a nursery school. The political hubris is clear. Not to mention the sheer environmental madness of it all: perhaps the most telling photograph shows the burying of heavy military equipment that became contaminated during the clean-up process.

But this is documentary that, indulging in some degree of manipulation, ventures into narrative symbolism. The door of a car on a road that goes nowhere is left ajar, which might accord with our notion of the panic of evacuation, until we learn that Pripjat, the former town of 45 000 where many of these photographs were taken, was

not evacuated until 36 hours after the disaster. Other things we must believe even if we cannot comprehend them: grasses and ferns growing through the floor of a hotel room, or the branch of a tree penetrating a pane of glass. Plants thrusting up through asphalt, shrubs with tiny white blooms: these are also miraculous, given the fact that a 400-hectare pine forest near the reactor died within days of the accident, the trees, their needles bright red, were buried in a concrete-lined pit.

Pripjat was built to house the workers at the power plant. In these depopulated photographs, their lives are not

represented so much as implied: rusting cots lined up against a nursery wall; shelves of little potties; school records abandoned, depriving children of part of their brief history. Suspended in time, every detail enters the realm of the symbolic as a token of loss. Even nature, with its mutated regenerations, has entered the symbolic realm at Chernobyl, for it is no longer, and never will be, as it once was. A tree that grows in a radioactive schoolyard is no longer a tree, but merely the idea of one.

Anne Marie Todkill
CMAJ