



Kendall Messick's Impermanence

May 16, 2010 John Bailey, ASC



"Conflagration #2," from "Impermanence."

ONE

When the fire department arrived a little past 11 am on May 4, 2006, at Kendall Messick's home on the 1100 block of Summit Avenue in Jersey City Heights, the second story and most of the roof were fully engulfed in flames. The fire raged out of control for some twenty minutes. One firefighter was treated for heat exhaustion, and the man who had accidentally started the fire, a worker ironically named Angel, was singed, but he refused medical attention.

Angel was one of a crew that was doing restoration work on Messick's 1903 Victorian home and studio. He was using mineral spirits and steel wool to strip old varnish from the wood detailing, when the damp

metal pad came into contact with an exposed live electrical outlet; it quickly flared up.

Messick described the sequence of events to me in an email:

I was on a job in NYC when I received the call from my alarm company notifying me that there was a confirmed fire in my home and the firemen were at the residence. All the operator was able to tell me was that the fire had started in the front of the second floor. This caused me acute anxiety since all of my negatives; original films and works on paper were in a small room at the front of [that floor].... I caught a cab in Times Square telling the driver to get me to Jersey City as fast as he could drive and I'm sure that he thought I was making up some story, until he saw that two blocks had been closed off leading to my home, and the fire trucks and ladders were clearly visible when he dropped me off.

Messick was at first refused access to the house, but fireman Mike Connelly finally agreed to let him go in if he went along. There was strong danger of structural collapse.

Messick is a professional photographer who is used to doing multi-media projects that document and celebrate other people's lives. So here he is, now standing inside the charred skeleton of his home and studio. What does he do? He does what he, as an artist, has to do. He takes his camera, a Hasselblad 503 CW loaded with a roll of black and white film—and exposes twelve frames, a document of the remains of his home and possessions. Afterwards, the broken windows are covered over with plywood. Here is the contact sheet from that roll of film.



"May 4, 2006," from "Impermanence."

Messick continues his recounting:

I didn't really trust myself to hold the camera steady, so I took it upstairs on a tripod and using available light I proceeded to ever so briefly document the aftermath. When I finally processed the film more than a year later, I saw that my exposures, which are typically spot on, were all over the map. Additionally, my focus was slightly off in some of the images. Given the way that I was feeling right then, I suppose it's not surprising. I'm glad that I photographed my home that day because as I now look at those photographs juxtaposed with the work that came later, the absolute devastation of the experience is made palpable.

Messick "felt like a spectator watching people move with more speed and deliberation than I could

muster. Outwardly, my emotions were in check, but inside was a different story. I remember wandering from room to room, looking.”

It was one thing to restore the house: the original white oak parquet floors with red mahogany inlay, the stained glass windows, the ornate tin ceiling on the ground floor that had once been a storefront—this was all just physical restoration. It was quite another thing to come to terms with his feelings about Angel, the worker who had accidentally started the fire. Angel had not been inside the house since the “conflagration.” Messick needed to confront these feelings, so he asked Angel to let him make his portrait in the room where the fire had broken out. “When he [Angel] saw the gutted interior for the first time, it was almost more than he could bear.... The experience of making someone’s portrait is always intimate, and while making Angel’s picture that day, I forgave him.”



“Angel,” from “Impermanence.”

TWO

Messick’s portraits are not singular, independent images. They are elements in the overall design of his projects. He says, “My ongoing body of work explores memory, evidence, personal history, and the transformative effect that time bestows upon experience.” Several of his earlier projects were: “Corapeake,” an exhibition and a documentary of stills, audio, and motion picture film, of the elderly African-American residents of the small town of Corapeake, North Carolina:



“Grace,” from “Corapeake.”



“Aunt Sarah,” from “Corapeake.”

A recently completed project, “The Projectionist,” is a traveling exhibition that includes six years of Messick’s still photos, models, documentary film, an actual theater, and original drawings created by Gordon Brinckle, a man who had a lifelong fascination with the golden age of movie palaces. In the basements of a series of his homes, Brinckle, who worked as a projectionist, and who died in 2007, constructed small-scale movie theaters, with films being shown on his RCA 16mm projector. The culmination of this obsession was the “Shalimar Theater” which he built over a period of forty years in the basement of his last home. Brinckle just happened to live across the street from where Kendall Messick grew up in Middletown, Delaware. Messick has a website devoted to Brinckle; it includes brief clips from the documentary he made about the man and his movie palace:

Princeton Architectural Press will publish *The Projectionist* book in the fall of this year.



“Opening Act,” from “The Projectionist.”



“Working and Re-working,” from “The Projectionist.”



“Backstage Exit,” from “The Projectionist.”

THREE

Now, in a turnabout that he had never anticipated, Messick realized that his new project would be... himself, and his coming to terms with the loss of, or at least the metamorphosis of, many of the objects he owned. The insurance company required Messick to fill out detailed claims forms. He combed through everything to estimate what was lost, what could be saved—and then he recorded it all:

“The randomness of the destruction became more obvious as I unearthed items that should not have survived, but somehow did, lying alongside items that I was certain would have been immune to damage, but were not. As I worked through this reconciliation, I was overwhelmed by the beauty revealed in the transformations wrought by the fire, smoke, and water; these details compelled me to once again pick up my camera.”



“Conflagration #31,” from “Impermanence.”

What Messick saw and photographed became “Impermanence.” The fire and water had created an accelerated breaking down of what happens naturally to objects over time; this transformative effect of time is one of the leading themes of Messick’s work. Working for three years and making over 200 images, he created a singular body of work that became an exhibition that he co-curated with University



“Conflagration # 23,” from “Impermanence.”

of Virginia Art Museum curator, Andrea Douglas. In a statement accompanying the “Impermanence” exhibition Douglas wrote:

He has oscillated between his typical portrait and documentary practice and a more aestheticized pictorialization to create photographs that are metonymic and act as a place of meditation and scrutiny.

To us laymen, that’s art-critical speak meaning that Messick’s photos are not only literal, though artful, records of the fire’s destruction; they also achieve a poetic and reflective dimension. And this they surely do.

It is this very quality of transcendence of the literal that first caught my attention when I saw the work at a late winter photography show called AIPAD (Association of International Photography Art Dealers). This is the annual coming together of dozens of international photo galleries at Manhattan’s Park Avenue Armory. There are always some historic 19th and 20th century masters shown at AIPAD by a few serious galleries, but most booths feature a real salmagundi of contemporary stylistic tics, portraits of pop culture icons, and often bizarre new photo-collage techniques. Increasingly, they reflect the penetration of both the high and low-end art gallery dealers into the traditional worlds of photography and photojournalism. Those lines, once crossed, have become so blurred that it is often difficult to define what is photography and what is often performative, multi-media self-promotion.

As I walked past the booth of the Robert Burge Gallery that displayed Messick’s project, “Impermanence,” I was caught up short. The booth walls, like that of the surrounding gallery spaces, were hung with vibrant color photographs. But these were not slick, hip, fashion or design statements. They presented what seemed to be a classic theme of photography—decayed and distressed interiors. Worn, crumbling, derelict, even burned structures are themes portrayed by such 20th century masters as Edward Weston, Clarence John Laughlin, and Aaron Siskind, as well as by contemporary artists like John Divola and Richard Misrach.



"Impermanence" AIPAD installation.



"Conflagration # 82," from "Impermanence."

But Messick's photographs didn't have the feel of intentionally abstracted art images; they were real "documents." This sensation was validated for me when I saw actual burned and fused objects placed next to their photographs.



"Conflagration #98," from Impermanence."



Steuben vase and its photo.

Here is what Messick says about the glass vase above:

The vase is a Steuben Verre De Soie vase (c1920) that was part of my glass collection. It didn't melt. It was wrapped in bubble wrap, which melted around it, fusing itself into the glass. The vase was also cracked but maintained its overall shape. The "firing" of the glass actually altered the finish of the urn, but it maintained its overall iridescence.

Even more ominous was a rusted, dented, gas or solvent can placed on a pedestal below its own photograph.

A burned wood panel leaned against the back wall. Seen in the context of a high end Manhattan photo art scene with surrounding booths offering copycat, mural sized decorator photos—this work fairly leapt off the walls with its sense of immediacy. As I was studying the installation I realized that the artist, Kendall Messick, was present. We began to talk. He was remarkably forthcoming about losing so much of what he owned, and of his decision to not only document it in photos, but how this experience became one of



Solvent can and its photo.

his “projects.” He told me that the renovation of his home was now complete, and he had decided to leave certain walls exposed, with conflagration scars evident. The first showing of “Impermanence” was at the most appropriate place, his restored home. Before and after the AIPAD installation, Mesick has welcomed visitors who make the easy trip from Manhattan. A PATH train from 6th Avenue and 23rd Street, exiting at the Hoboken stop, followed by a short taxi ride, brings you there. To see this work at his home gives the term “site-specific” a new dimension. You can make an appointment here:

mail to: kendall@kmessick.com



"Impermanence" installation in Messick's home.



"Impermanence" installation in Messick's home.

FOUR

Carol and I began collecting photography over 35 years ago. I have seen the photo scene develop both in New York and Los Angeles from a few small galleries that were more or less isolated from the larger art world (the photography department at museums then often categorized as a subset of Prints and Drawings), into the most cutting edge of art media, which routinely now seems to suck in painters and sculptors who have exhausted the reservoir of their own forms. Major museums routinely launch photography retrospectives that compete with painting exhibitions in attendance numbers.

Photography has both benefitted by and has suffered from this attention. The market in collectible photography has never been more “hot,” the gallery openings more hip, replete with wine sipping, black-clad flâneurs and flashbulb-popping paparazzi bird-dogging media starlets. But, an almost unintended consequence has been a kind of identity crisis for many longtime “pure photography” artists trying to find their way through the thicket of art world modish tropes and conceits. A photographer who struggles to make unique photochemical prints of moderate size that can be developed and fixed in darkroom trays or with home Photoshop digital print stations—even as Chelsea and Beverly Hills galleries are covering their walls with mural sized “confrontations” and “interventions”—faces considerable challenges. We are once again living in a golden age of photojournalism, but these documents of the real world, made by dedicated men and women often working in far-flung hellholes, seem overwhelmed by movie screen sized, pseudo-dramatic installation sets, created by “artists” who seem rabidly intent on becoming Hollywood filmmakers manqué. One of the many things I find so appealing about Kendall Messick’s work is the consistent commitment he has made in his “projects” to real world experience, work that is focused on individual lives and on those of intimate communities, even, in the case of the “Impermanence,” on himself.

Messick uses his Hasselblad for much of the work, especially the portraits, but he also employs a Sinar 8 x 10 view camera for high-resolution still life. He also is dedicated to working in film rather than digital:

I am partial to film and continue to use it exclusively for all still photography that pertains to my on-going body of artwork. Since all [of it] is related to history, memory, and in some cases folklore, I feel far more comfortable with the archival stability of the negative versus digital, (not to mention I prefer the “look” of film).

But he embraces also the greater potential, as well as the tools, of our insistent multi-media world. He tugs at and breaks traditional parameters of photography as “document,” and creates a wider approach to recording life experience.

After I had finished a first draft of this piece, Messick sent me an email that answered a question I had asked earlier about one of the “Corapeake” photographs, one that I had not known how to include in this essay, as it was not, strictly speaking, a portrait. It is a haunting still life that he calls “Metaphor.” What he wrote about it brought home to me what I had been struggling to say about his use of the photograph as document, and about the incorporation of physical objects as co-narrators of his stories:



“Metaphor,” from “Corapeake.”

"Metaphor" is an image made in 1995 as I was just beginning the Corapeake project. The jackets were found in an abandoned house in the woods. The house at the time had three exterior walls standing, and I walked in to discover that the jackets had been left hanging as you see them. The original title came as a result of my writing a short story that was inspired by this photograph, and the jackets in my story became metaphors. The title stuck and was reaffirmed as a collector remarked that to her, the image recalled the horrid history of [African-American] lynchings.

I went back to the house six years later and it had completely collapsed except that a large tree prevented one section from falling. This allowed me to crawl into the room and, amazingly, the jackets were still there. I saved them—and now they are part of the traveling exhibition.

Here is Kendall Messick's website. Enter it and wander into his stories:

www.kendallmessick.com

All photos in this essay are by Messick.