

Semblance
&
Shadows Like Anxiety

Images by Liza Eurich and Colin Miner
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HOW TO LOOK AT AN IMAGE, OR A BLACK HOLE*

I IN MEMORIAM

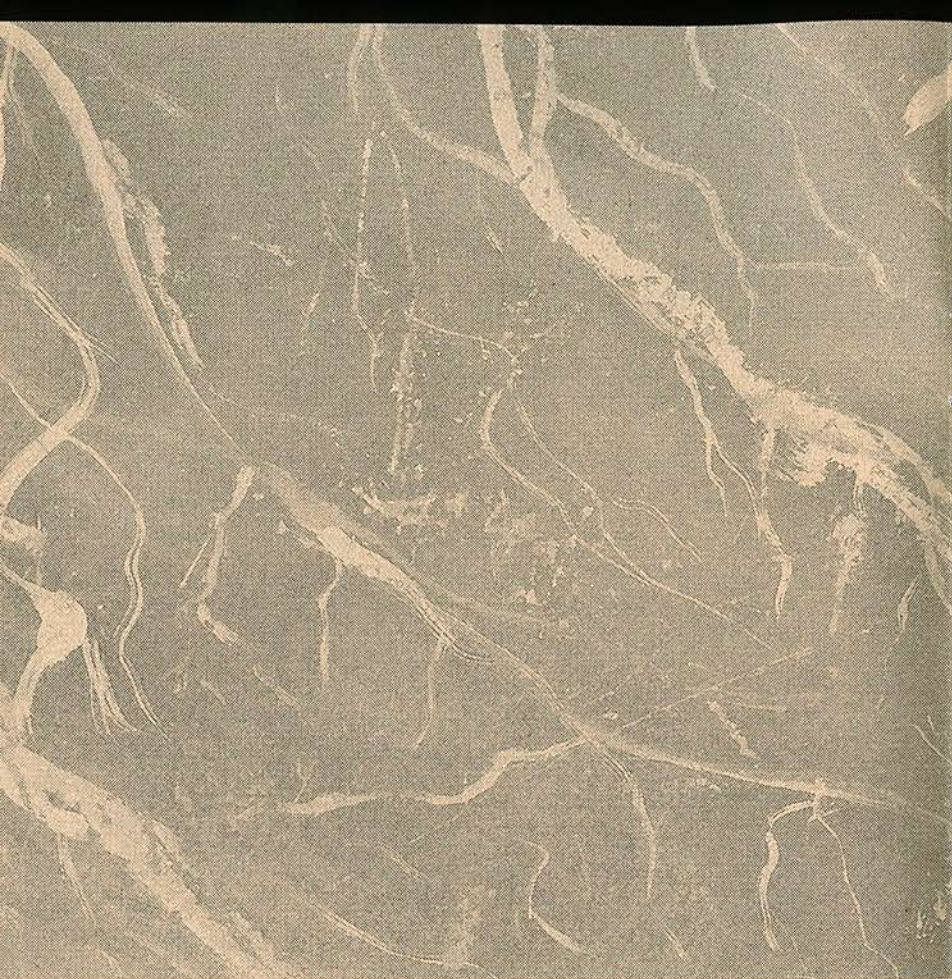
I came across the photo years ago while reading a book by Michael Taussig called *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. The author had written about his travels to a cemetery in Portbou, Spain to pay homage to the philosopher he'd spent much of his life thinking about. The photo depicts a modernist steel doorway jutting out of the top of a cliff and descending down a steep, enclosed staircase to the sea. The view from the top of the stairs frames the water below, the view from the bottom frames the sky.

Entitled *Passages*, the monument was designed by Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan and installed fifty years after Benjamin's death. Fleeing Nazi-occupied France, Benjamin traversed the treacherous trails of the Pyrenees into Spain and towards what he hoped would be ultimate refuge in America. He was detained in the small port town on the Mediterranean Sea and refused further passage, committing suicide the same night he was arrested.

No other photograph has lingered with me as long as this one. I come back to it time and time again, unsure of what makes it memorable. Is it the drama of the landscape, its jagged peaks and waves? Or is it the existential image of a man carrying his final manuscript (one that has never been found) in a suitcase over the mountains, towards something painfully unknown? The more I call up that image of the staircase cutting through the cliff face, the more I have to remind myself that I have never been there. That my only experience of the place is through a photograph. It feels so real in my memory, I can almost taste the ocean spray.

There's something archaeological about looking. A way of piecing together a history—or more often, a fiction—from the traces that remain. I remember a photograph I took of my boyfriend on a beach in Portugal in 2009. Waist-deep in turquoise water, he's smiling with his hand on his chin, and it seems like yesterday that we were there swimming together. I even remember what I was thinking about when I took the photo (that is, what to do with the strong-smelling cheese that had been fumigating our tiny hotel room for days). Writing this now, it occurs to me that Benjamin would have liked to get as far as this beach in Portugal. This beach where we were busy giggling, sunbathing, so many decades later. In fact, we'd travelled that whole coast freely that summer, without any concern for borders.

If there is one way to look at an image, I offer this:
There is no photograph that is not also a memorial.



THE WINDOWS OF LUIS VUITTON

Some time ago, in a period of crass artistic disillusionment, I rented a tiny one-hundred foot studio that was much too expensive for me on a street dominated by auto body shops. The one point of interest on the street was Eddie's Hangups, a store selling retail fixtures, shelving, velvety jewellery displays and mannequins. Avoiding my work, I visited often, perusing the aisles for odds and ends that might inspire ideas for sculptures. Most of the time I left empty-handed, only once purchasing a

handful of shiny metal brackets for no other reason than that they reminded me of human fingers. Art that is self-reflexive about its own method of display is the best kind of art, I thought then. I still believe this, but my perspective is more jaded.

Tonight, the trademark *LV* buckle glints seductively in the spotlight as I wait under the high awning for the evening bus. Advertising has taught cynicism to the savvy viewer, and yet there are still times in which I fall subject to its spell. In the window, a solar system of multi-coloured orbs hover against a black background. Planets rendered in marbled blues and oranges and magnetic pinks, gaseous clouds and rings. Luis Vuitton makes us believe in a world in which the universe quite literally revolves around a leather purse.

In this case, the purse is red. Not my taste, but quite worthy of somebody's desire. And who can help but feel wonder. At the seamless craft of desire-manufacture. The mastery of detail. I imagine a factory of workers skilled in the production of intangible feelings—a Santa's workshop with whole departments delegated to artifice, illusion. I look closely at the installation in that way that I've seen fellow artists do, probing for the imperfections that might expose the apparatus (the suspended fishing line, the hand-painted surface, the ingeniously-disguised mount). But no, this one leaves no loose threads.

A friend of mine got a job last Christmas designing the retail windows of Hugo Boss. Her job involved a morning spent ironing the wrinkles out of dress shirts, and an afternoon spent dressing a dozen heavy, headless mannequins in them. Within a month she'd quit (or had been fired, I can't remember exactly) over what was considered to be her "strong personality" (translation: the manager didn't like her and she didn't like him). Prior to this I'd been so certain that she'd found the perfect job—one that was as

glamorous and creative as the windows I'd seen. That the actual work turned out to have more in common with the dressing of stiff people in seniors' homes came as a surprise to us both.

Looking past the reflected image of myself now, I see only a distorted vision of my future. I've disappeared entirely: replaced by a gullible, smiling girl lost in one of Benjamin's Parisian arcades, a girl who steps into the magician's box even though it threatens to chop her in half. Is it narcissism, or self-consciousness, that brings me back to my senses? When I reappear in the window, I look just the same as I once was—except this time, returned as a reproduction. A replica made of even poorer quality than a purse: imitation leather, face posing reluctantly on a plinth.

On images orbiting outer space:

I bring only an inner space, my very own black hole.



A CORPSE FLOWER AND SOME REVELATIONS
FOLLOWING LAST NIGHT'S SUPERMOON

The *Amorphophallus titanum* flowers rarely in the wild and even more rarely in cultivation, generally only once every six to ten years. When it blooms, the "giant misshapen phallus," as it is so called, exposes its signature flesh-coloured interior and emits a rotting odour for a fleeting period of twelve to thirty-six hours. Enthusiastic photographers flock to conservatories around the world in the hopes of capturing the exotic flower in action, while



I watch the event, live-streamed, from the comfort of my home.

It was recently reported that in 2016 an unprecedented number of corpse flowers bloomed within months of each other, leaving many scientists to speculate about the nature of such an occurrence. Some hypothesize that the seeds of the various plants may have been close cousins of each other. Others, that corpse flowers are simply more popular now than they ever have been before.


To me, the simultaneous climaxing of such a strange plant signifies nothing less than a sign: zeitgeist, a temperature change, a feeling of psychic synchronization.

Increasingly, coincidences begin to look like proof.

Take last night, for example: a supermoon, and the first of its kind since 1948. How I crouched by the open window in my wet hair and pajamas, squinting in vain and in too many directions. When I finally found it, just after 11 pm, the moon appeared full but no bigger than usual. I'd heard it would be bright enough to read by moonlight (I didn't test this, but feel confident that this couldn't have been true). What does one do in the absence built by expectation? I wondered whether my timing had simply been wrong.

I went to bed, slightly disappointed but otherwise just the same. And I might have forgotten about the incident entirely had I not awoke the next morning to so many impressive images. The moon, full and bright, hanging over a skyscraper. The moon, above a beach with an unusually high tide. The moon, the moon, the supermoon. What had I seen, or not seen, last night?

I asked an ornithologist once—and one specializing in



songbirds—what it was like to study something so fleeting. I wanted to know his philosophical bent, the motive behind his desire to observe a moving subject... But he told me he'd never even considered the question. That he just did what he did, and got better at looking.

With each photo of a corpse flower, or evanescent moon, I witness some small part of myself unravelling—that part of me that gives special attention to things that can only be witnessed once. It feels like a violation to replay these events, to watch them over and over without concern for their innate ephemerality. But I don't know how else to play witness, or how to show gratitude for the discrete event.

My upcoming new year's resolution is this:
To get better at looking at impermanent things.

ANXIETY AND TRANSLATION

You described it to me once: how light moves through a cloud. You drew a diagram on your napkin, your hand shaking from all the coffee. The picture looked like a pizza slice covered in ribbons. Like the album art on Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*.

Thank god for diagrams. How I came to know about hair follicles, assembling furniture, the making of earthquakes. We draw diagrams in order to make something more easily understood, breaking a thing down into its respective parts. *Flatness can be useful, you say, now let me explain.* You draw some waving lines on the page in order to illustrate how light enters and exits a drop of water. Meanwhile all I see in the droplet is a version of my own body: permeable and diffuse.

What about the anxious image? The failed diagram, the unfinished portrait, the photograph that refuses to disclose?

In your studio, many artworks gracefully refuse to arrive. The wrong choice, followed by the right one, followed by the wrong choice, again. You label them all *Untitled (Fail 1, 2, 3...)*. Somewhere in the process of translating ideas into form, you slipped, but can't remember where you fell.

A friend tells you to sleep on it. A yoga teacher tells you to breathe into your spine. To breathe into your sides. To breathe in four directions...but you are no longer following. *We go through our days carrying the burdens of the world*, he lectures. *This is your time to let go.*

An image is anxious when it trembles, unsure of what it wants.

I am thinking of a thrift store painting that used to hang in my aunt's house. Of two women crouching awkwardly beside some kind of geometric cone. An innocent, metaphysical scene no doubt painted for a high school art class, the picture is rendered in a naïve realist style, full of dusty grey shadows with a bit too much green. The women's faces look blankly into the distance like heroines on a communist movie poster; their complexions, thick like pancake foundation, so unnerving in daylight.

Now I can't decide whether this is a self-conscious picture, or a falsely confident one. All I know is that the image rings behind my eyes whenever I read science fiction. The painting reminds me of an early cover of *A Wrinkle in Time*: the young adult novel by Madeleine L'Engle that suffered a certain rite of passage for my friends and I in the 1980s, reading through our preteen years. In the story, some children discover a tesseract—a "wrinkle in time"—and go on a wild adventure in the fifth dimension. I remember feeling inspired by the story and its possibilities for space travel.

The anxious image flirts with these kinds of possibilities. Anxiety can be generative.

I heard that the author originally had difficulty finding a publisher for the book because it was uncommon to have a female protagonist in a science fiction novel. (And now, when I see that painting hanging on the wall at my aunt's house, I consider it quite radical.)

On anxiety and late arrivals:

Just be thankful to be working with moving parts.

HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE ME?

The only time I ever visited the Sutro Baths it was very foggy, but maybe it always is. Taking a path from Ocean Beach and up a steep incline around the cliffs on the northwest side of San Francisco, the fog appeared suddenly, out of nowhere, as I rounded the final point by the Cliff House. I took momentary shelter from the wind in the life-size camera obscura I found there, paying the five-dollar admission like a proper tourist. Inside the darkened room, viewers gathered around a concave table as mirrors projected a 360-degree photograph of the surrounding landscape onto it. It was too foggy to see much. But I did see some waves—and a seal—unless the seal had been a rock.

“To collect photographs is to collect the world,” Susan Sontag wrote. But this photograph of the beach is imprinted in my mind only. It’s an imprint that I carry around with me in some invisible pocket: my image of the world as seen through fog.

Take my first breakup, in eighth grade. A boy I never even liked all that much dumped me before I got around to dumping him first. I still have some regrets about this. But I remember how he did it, he said, “I just can’t get a *sense* of you. I don’t know what you’re *thinking*, how you really *feel*.” Already, it seemed my lovers were having trouble managing what would soon become my signature ambivalence—the distance that would keep me from openly loving or being loved. But what impresses me even now is our early concern for nuance: our shared apprehension about the *sensing*, the *thinking*, the existence of *feelings*. Our anxiety about the cloudedness of interpersonal relations.

Or consider my particular affinity for the opaque: how, when I

used to paint, I used only the flattest and most solid of colours. How I built each work, layer by layer, each one eliminating that which came before it, in a series of total, annihilistic erasures. I can still hear the voice of one professor reverberating in my head—*Slow down the reading of the work! Build in unreadability!*—two of her favourite lines.

But how much do you give, and how much do you withhold?

On everything I’ve gleaned from the visible and invisible world: I prefer fiction, but I’ll be the first to let you know when I’m telling a lie.



*Written for the exhibitions *Semblance & Shadows Like Anxiety* with work by Liza Eurich and Colin Miner at Stride Gallery in Calgary, Alberta, January 13 - March 3, 2017

(THE GARDENER'S DREAM)

Waking up each day well before dawn, the gardener enjoys the twilight that the rest of us miss. The bedroom window is steamy from sleep, making the frosty flowerbeds outside appear pillowy, translucent. In the quiet of the blue hour he puts on sweaters, makes a pot of coffee, turns the radio on. You might perceive the gardener as a simpleton: a blue-collar worker content with base routines. But his long days are filled with thinking and looking; working with his hands. The vocabulary of the gardener is as fine-tuned as any artist who needs to know quickly an invasive plant from a native one. His knowledge of these things is cumulative.

At dinner time, the gardener recounts his day to her, saying, "Today I saw a red-breasted sapsucker in the tree behind the yard. Its colouration was very unusual for this time of year."

In the warm house all day, writing, the woman has missed the sapsucker entirely, especially failing to notice its unusual colouration. She hasn't looked out the window in years. He's learned something from the twilight, she thinks to herself: from the period of the day when light's contrast is most reduced. The gardener learns to look differently in this morning light, and with greater respect for nuance.

