Lucinda Devlin: The Omega Suites
Stephen Tourlentes: Building Absence

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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Lucinda Devlin and Stephen Tourlentes show us how we treat the people our society finds least desirable. The two do so obliquely – their images are devoid of human presence. Indeed, these artists focus upon the techniques we employ to deal with the people we condemn: We lock them up, and – in certain cases where lives have been taken – we put them to death. Tourlentes shows us penitentiaries situated in landscapes, and Devlin depicts the inside of holding cells, witness rooms and execution chambers. Significantly, both artists treat this highly charged subject matter in a seemingly nonjudgmental fashion, thereby allowing us to make up our own minds about incarceration and capital punishment. The result of these photographers' sensitivity to the formal beauty of things is visual splendor coupled with a level of horror that is barely fathomable. This relationship, fraught with tension and common to both art and life, is the underlying theme of this exhibition.

Omega is the twenty-fourth and last letter of the Greek alphabet. Like death, it marks the end of a cycle. In *The Omega Suites*, Devlin examines our officially sanctioned methods of executing criminals in different parts of the United States. The intellectual rigor she applies in drawing up her iconography of the spaces and instruments of death is modeled upon the clinical precision and detachment of the German school of photography. The influential typologies of industrial architecture established by the photographic team of Hilla and Bernd Becher are obvious precedents, as are the earlier documentary endeavors of August Sander and Karl Blossfeldt. Classification is a prelude to meaningful comparison, an activity greatly facilitated by photography. Devlin assumes her rightful place within this distinguished tradition.

Lucinda Devlin is aware of our age-old fascination with death. She knows that our relationship both to our own mortality and to that of others has much to tell us about ourselves. In fact, it is almost impossible to look at this artist's photographs without imagining ourselves in the place of earlier as well as future convicts, strapped onto a gurney or to an electric chair. The absence of actors facilitates this type of transposition. The unusual, large, square format of the chromogenic prints, shot with a Hasselblad 2¼" square format, both tightens the focus and creates a slightly cramped impression that is entirely appropriate to the subject. Devlin's art exacts empathy.

Lucinda Devlin is interested in ideas of perfection that are tied to geometry. The stark, glacial, oppressively silent interiors she captures so splendidly effortlessly inscribe themselves within the ongoing history of geometric abstraction. Hence, centrally placed objects remind us of the pictorial strategies of Josef Albers, while paired windows offering a view of a lethal injection chamber surrounded by planes of pink and black are oddly reminiscent of the work of Peter Halley. This artist exposes us to an unknown world of sleek, authoritarian, modernist interior design. She lets us discover, however, the imperfections embedded in these tightly controlled spatial situations, resembling laboratories, operating rooms and waiting rooms in hospitals. Tacky linoleum floors, cinder-block walls, buckling ceilings of composite board, peeling coats of paint and water stains strike jarring notes in these otherwise immaculate chambers.

Lucinda Devlin, *Final Holding Cell, Greensville Correctional Facility, Jarratt, Virginia*, 1991, c-print, 20" x 20", courtesy Paul Rodgers/9W, NY

Lucinda Devlin, *Witness Room, Potosi Correctional Center, Potosi, Missouri*, 1991, c-print, 20" x 20", courtesy Paul Rodgers/9W, NY

Devlin often flirts with notions of objectivity and perfection by photographing the principal motif (e.g., an electric chair, a gurney) from either the front or the side as she situates it close to or, like a bull's eye, in the heart of her firmly calibrated configurations. This severe, classicizing method seeks to excise feeling and, consequently, judgment. However, this artist occasionally achieves greater drama by photographing the motif from an angle. Diagonal vectors of movement are thereby introduced, which make the space immeasurable and thus irrational. In fact, an unexpected, surreal atmosphere permeates several of these photographs. In one instance, we see a microphone suspended above a gurney upon which spotlights are directed. A clock ticks away in the background. In another, we see an air-conditioner. The electric chair in Atmore, Ala., is painted bright yellow. Three telephones are placed within proximity of the chair in Columbia, S.C. A lectern stands in one lethal injection chamber, and we see an exit sign through the window of another one. We are made to look through windows and doorways, as if we were – alternatingly – the convict or the witness to an impending execution. We are shown mirrored glass as well as blinds and curtains that block out views. The sense of sight is obviously all important in instances of capital punishment, for that is the faculty used by witnesses to verify that justice has been carried out. Seeing is believing.

Lucinda Devlin tempts the gaze. She delights in the play of lines, planes and volumes in space, as well as in nuances of light and color. Because the *Suites* were shot exclusively using the available amount of light, prolonged exposure times were required. The tungsten-balanced film she employed recorded daylight as cyan and fluorescent light as green, causing ethereal color shifts to occur, some of which were corrected at the time of printing. A remarkable palette of often washed-out, luminous hues we associate with pleasure was thereby achieved.

Stephen Tourlentes is interested in ambiguity and auras of mystery. He photographs prison camps at night, from the outside, and from a distance ranging anywhere from half a mile to a mile away. These nocturnes are shot from ground level, in black and white, with an 8" x 10" Deardorff. Because he relies solely upon the available light sources, this artist uses a wide-lens aperture and prolonged exposure times, ranging from five minutes to as long as two hours. Hence, his photographs become meditations upon the effects of prison floodlights in space and – by implication – time. It is always "daytime" in prison, and one goes to prison to "do time."

Tourlentes is concerned with the proliferation of prisons in the American landscape. He explores to what extent these places of incarceration and execution mesh with their surrounding environment. He has discovered that prisons are relatively inconspicuous when viewed from a distance in daylight. The opposite is true at night, when these compounds are flooded with bright light for security reasons. Tourlentes has chosen the traditional horizontal format of landscape painting to examine this phenomenon.

Stephen Tourlentes, *Wyoming State Death House – Rawling, WY*, 2000, gelatin silver print, 20" x 24", courtesy Revolution Gallery, Ferndale, Mich.

Nineteenth-century masters Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Frederick Church painted panoramic landscapes that captured the splendor of the recently conquered American terrain. They, like many of their contemporaries, saw America as a new Eden filled with promise, before which man was compelled to stand in awe. This Romantic notion of the Sublime, which is perhaps best reflected in American landscape photography in the work of Ansel Adams, is one Tourlentes cleverly alludes to in his series of nocturnes. Those glowing enclaves we spot in the distance, which are seemingly unattainable and locked in the center of his compositions, appear as images of the Heavenly Jerusalem here on earth. Those far places the artist draws our attention to are suffused with white, cleansing light, which symbolizes the good and, consequently, life itself. Beyond this light lies darkness, a traditional symbol of evil. Once again, however, things are not

Stephen Tourlentes, *Utah State Death House – Draper, Utah*, 2000, gelatin silver print, 20" x 24", courtesy Revolution Gallery, Ferndale, Mich.

Stephen Tourlentes, *San Quentin, CA*, 1996, gelatin silver print, 20" x 24", courtesy Revolution Gallery, Ferndale, Mich.

what they appear to be, for people marked as felons are locked up in those places suffused with unearthly brilliance, where life can be extinguished with the flip of a switch. What lies outside those zones is comparatively innocent and thus clearly not evil. The meanings we traditionally associate with Caravaggesque tenebrism are thereby distorted. In Tourlentes' photographs, light is a mechanism of surveillance and control, generating an atmosphere of fear and threat.

Prisons photographed from a considerable distance at night can be easily mistaken for something quite different, say an industrial complex, an airport or a sports arena. As with these examples, one question that arises when contemplating Tourlentes' images is to what extent prison complexes affect their immediate surroundings. How does it feel to live and raise a family within proximity of a death house? These photographs suggest that such structures are often erected in impoverished rural areas, where they introduce possibilities of employment and lead to an improvement of the local economy. The social, political and economic factors that tie into our culture of increasing criminalization and incarceration are causes for great concern.

Stephen Tourlentes' photographs are characterized by a lack of sensationalism. The close-up device, often employed to bring forward atrocity, is expressly bypassed. Nothing is manifest in these images, for nothing is situated at their surface. We are eventually struck by an atmosphere of desolation and great sadness. Incandescent light dematerializes the architecture that lies wrapped within it as the light bounces off the unseemly land, the occasional slick surface of water, and the empty sky occupying the top half of each composition.

This artist keenly underscores the banality of his subject. Those islands of light framed by darkness start looking alike, and thus – like Andy Warhol, Dan Graham and Edward Ruscha in their respective projects – Tourlentes suggests the possibility of the infinite. We have been informed that the prison population has quadrupled in the United States over the last twenty years, and that a new prison is opened almost weekly. But at what human cost? When will this end? These are the questions Tourlentes and Devlin invite us to ponder.

– Michaël Amy, critic and art historian, Rochester, NY, June 2001

Cover: Lucinda Devlin, *Lethal Injection Chamber from Witness Room, Cummins Unit, Grady, Arkansas*, 1991, c-print, 20" x 20", courtesy Paul Rodgers/9W, NY

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