Review of Paul Hester: The Elusive City

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Like Atget's work in Paris, Paul Hester's photographs of Houston seem transparent: they are infused with light, with a formal structure that is revealed rather than imposed, with a grace both historically grounded and fleeting. Both Atget's and Hester's photographs also represent moments in time that have been recognized by particular sensibilities, sensibilities as compelled by their own inner workings, as by the reality of the subject matter they confront. Each photographer dealt with architectural themes. Each supported himself with commissioned work that eventually was recognized by museums. And both clearly were in love with the medium. But here the comparison ends. Atget had Paris at the turn of one century; Hester has Houston at the turn of another. And if Atget was interested in old Paris and worked for decades to reveal it, such a compulsion on Hester's part would entail no more than a few weeks of travel around Harris County. There simply is not that much of the old left.

Houston is a city in perpetual transition, one in constant need of approval - precocious and energetic, always on the prowl for that elusive "world class" status. It's a city which consequently tends to look with a nervous tic to the outside, more than to its past, for visual identity. It's a remarkable gumbo of a place - savory, sloppy, funky, and at times wonderful: a region with little zoning, grand aspirations, distinguished buildings, a Texas-sized sense of entitlement to land and development, pleasant neighborhoods with beautiful trees, colorful flowers, and drifting clouds, a bright but sterile downtown (about to undergo yet another face lift), tract mansions and true mansions, the most carcinogenic air in the nation, the remains of a ward system that still tends to segregate, manic-depressive sprawl onto the prairies and into what's left of the piney woods. It's a city with oddly situated clumps of towers, strip malls that run for miles, roaring air conditioners, and residential developments of so many sorts, sizes and geographically inappropriate names that one feels at times, as though one inhabits a cartoon. And Hester's photography seems to be of interlocking thought on all this.

He celebrates what remains of the old city through elegiac photographs of buildings downtown and elsewhere; he is in touch with the spirit that produces such structures as the Astrodome and the vast developments to the southwest, and he clearly is both saddened and outraged by the wholesale elimination of important buildings.

Walker Evans, toward the end of his life, spoke of his attempt to photograph in a style that he termed "lyrical documentary". It's a phrase, that while close to oxymoronic, becomes on reflection, a description of a photography that tries both objectively and passionately, to define a cultural truth. It's a style that works to reveal plainness in all its hidden complexity, from a point of view that is intensely personal. Hester's work on Houston might be described in this way.

The exhibiton of his work at the Menil Collection, The Elusive City: Photographs of Houston, was sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance, in celebration of their twenty-fifth anniversary. (The RDA is a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of architecture, urban design and the "built environment" in the Houston region.) The show, which was conceived by Drexel Turner and curated by the RDA in conjunction with the Menil, was made up of forty-one images of Houston, taken over a span of twenty years. The photographs were black and white, relatively small (none larger than eleven by fourteen inches) and were elegantly printed in classic full-toned ways. They were exhibited in a single room, and as one followed the bouncing line of images through this room, one was directed, by the flow of the work, to grouped aspects of the city: contemporary architecture, neighborhoods, downtown, demolition, freeway strips, odd small buildings, and the like. Within these categories are of course, the specifics: a Vietnamese photographic studio, the Menil house, the omnipresent demolitions, Hispanic dance halls, a palm tree being moved by a fork lift, a massive hydroponic garden, et cetera. A small but well printed and affordable catalogue of the show also exists which reproduces the photographs (in variant order) and includes a perceptive essay by Douglas Milburn.

The primary subject of the show, apart from Houston of course, is architecture. Hester is a superb architectural photographer, and his work presents both buildings and their contexts in wonderfully intimate ways. He is also an artist in his own right, and while the show is composed of a mix of work that was done on assignment for Cite, (the journal of the RDA), or on commission from the Houston Public Library, or the National Endowment for the Humanities, many photographs were taken simply for Hester's own enjoyment.

His work shows Houston in its multiplicity, yet at sometime in the not too distant future, we would genuinely benefit from a large show of Hester's work. Forty-one rigorously chosen photographs are fine - but I finished the show wanting more. Two hundred would begin to reveal the city in its depth, complexity and contradiction. These forty-one function in immediate ways, but also must work symbolically, with one photograph standing in for many. Hester has, I am sure, most of those that might be added in his files. For he, more than any other photographer has kept vigil with Houston. And given the nanosecond reconfiguration of our town, the ability to know where we've come from, where we are, what we are losing, and what we might re-build, is important.

What we were given, however, on the walls of the Menil, I found fascinating. First, apart from revisiting the city photographically, it's simply a pleasure to watch what Hester can do to make a moment come to life. Though the photographs appear seamless when first experienced, their inner workings emerge as one examines edges, oblique angles, small figures in movement, configurations of cars: the stopped action of one sort or another, that many of these seemingly still images contain.

All photographs deal with time. It's the molten bedrock of the medium, if you will, and it's particularly important in photographs, which are made with the historical record in mind. And Hester deals with it in a variety of ways.

The initial scene that his camera generally engages is that of a static but historically involved environment - the building, or the parking lot or the hydroponic plant stand – the photographed space. A considered surface record is made of this space's present and, if the site is rich enough, of its slow configuration over the years. We read this part of the image's surface, looking for clues, recognizing things that may be particular to a defined cultural time, and place: details in signs and lettering, the juxtaposition of architectural eras, the scraped surfaces of development and demolition, the vacancy of certain buildings.

In Hester's work, there is also generally an interest in "caught" time as well, the photographic present – the motion of people, the cars, a smile, the clouds, light and shadow, a young man in a suit striding off an escalator. In Hester's work these things are very carefully placed, or more photographically speaking, these events are anticipated. There is patience to his work that is admirable. (As is an appreciation of the sensuousness of Gulf Coast light which illuminates the work, and which buttresses a feeling that one can move through the photographs in unhurried ways.) Yet it's primarily the structure of the work, particularly those small events that cluster around what is apparently, but not necessarily central, that tempt us to look again – and again and again - at the image, and then within the context of this show, to the city itself.

This mix of historic and immediate time is read by all of us, in later time yet of course – in some cases, up to twenty years after the photograph was made – and counting. So finally, the temporal layering of the work, combined with the cultural contents of the photograph generate our thought and emotion, something that this work invariably does - an empathy born, I think, out of a recognition of shared truth.

The best photographs, Hester's included, always seem given, an instant recognition of variety: layers of time, symbol, and shape - cultural and personal content. And in Hester's case, some are recognized and some are helped along with an inner vision of what might be: his line-up of African American elementary school kids at the back of the Museum of Fine Arts - tiny but generating good will beneath live oaks, a neoclassical frieze and the names of the MFA's enshrined artists: Titian, Raphael, Velasquez et al; three gorgeous, plaintive photographs of individual homes just razed, in a

neighborhood designated to become Greenway Plaza, images filled with light, grace and movement, smashed homes as beautiful as angels; a photograph of the old Glatzmaier's Seafood Restaurant downtown, with a menu as readable as any documented by Bernice Abbott, and a smile on a woman's face that brightens an already brilliant day; a remarkable street photograph of people, architecture and Port-A-Cans at a Party on the Plaza, the whole seemingly choreographed, yet grounded by a clear photograph of the Alley Theatre (note our Anglophilic re); a beautiful photograph of the Houston skyline taken from the top of the University of Houston School of Architecture, with columns everywhere and a hard-hatted worker and little ladder grace-noting the already light-filled scene; or the two photographs from the edges of freeways, pictures of trash, of a construction sight and of the beginnings of a parking lot with not much on it but tire track, shadows and weird sign poles. Yet each locks into place with the precision of poetic line. And I could go on. At Hester's best, there is no question. The work is full, graceful, and engaging, and the photographs roll out vignettes that tell the story of contemporary Houston. Hester tells our stories well, and he tells of our variety. He personalizes, humanizes and makes magical all those important local things that in clumsier hands would be pure document.

A final note: as one might expect, given its nature, this has been a popular show. Each time I visited the gallery, people talked animatedly about the work, calling back and forth to each other, pointing things out, nodding and shaking their heads – all unusual but appropriately playful activity in the hushed beauty of the Menil.

(One remarkable irony in the show is the inclusion of a photograph of the interior of the de Menil house, Phillip Johnson's first residential design, and certainly a Houston landmark, which apparently is now threatened with demolition.)