

An Interview with the Artists: Mark Havens and Billy Cress

***American Assemblies*, Gravy Studio and Gallery, December 1st, 2017–December 31st, 2017**

This month's show at Gravy, *American Assemblies*, comprises two sets of photographic works that focus on Jersey Coast architecture. The title for the show comes from the purpose of the two projects, importantly, collecting and preserving beautiful and dying structures through still photographs. These places, quintessentially American in their design, are captured in a very straightforward, honest way and are presented in an undiluted fashion. I asked the two photographers some questions to get some deeper insight into their work, their artistic minds, and this particular show. Here is the full interview for both artists.

Alex Phucas with Mark Havens

Alex: What makes the title “American Assemblies” so apt for this particular dual showing?

Mark: I think it applies in two ways: these places are so quintessentially American in their design and second, I think Billy and I have captured our respective subject matter in a very straightforward, honest sort of way. There isn't a lot of artifice in these images. The intrigue comes from the subject matter being presented in such an undiluted fashion.

Alex: Can you elaborate on the beauty you each see in your respective subject matter? For example, why are these things beautiful to you when they're in their “off-season” or “closed down” state as opposed to when they are or were occupied/operational?

Mark: Most of what I wanted to capture – once the project came into focus for me – wasn't vacancy or seclusion but a sort “purity”, for lack of a better term. I wanted to show these places in their best, almost idealized state. I really like Werner Herzog's term for it – “ecstatic truth” – which he says can only be reached by using fabrication, imagination and stylization. In the end, part of that stylization for me turned out to be the elimination of every other subject but the building itself.

The deserted nature of the photographs (which eventually turned into a primary component of the artistic statement that I was trying to make with the project) actually started as a practical measure, though. I began by photographing several motels during the tourist season but I soon realized that even a single car parked in front of a motel obscured a huge amount of structure. I then tried photographing at various points deep into the off-season but then the motels were fully closed-up and dark, almost feature-less. I eventually figured out that there were only two very small windows of time when it was possible to make the images that I envisioned: just prior to the beginning of the tourist season (around the beginning of May) and just after it concluded (around the end of September). Only then were the lights on, the pools full, the chairs and plastic palm trees out, yet very few people were around. It was especially hard to shoot at those times because they were continually moving targets. The tourist season in Wildwood doesn't have an official beginning or end. Many motels open when their owners get back from wherever they spent the winter and close whenever people stop coming. I found that varied wildly from season to season.

Once I began to shoot photographs that were devoid of people or activity of any kind, though, I realized that the isolation actually clarified the bold architectural forms and, more importantly, served as an analogue of the larger situation at the time, which was pretty much wholesale destruction of a great number of motels on the island. Many of these buildings were empty not simply because the summer was over but because we as a culture, for better or worse, had moved on. Some were shot just days before the electricity was cut and they were demolished. For several of the motels, I shot the front while crews were starting the demolition in the back.

Alex: As photographers, what are you trying to capture in terms of “remembering”?

Mark: This project was an effort to bring out the interplay of an idealized past and its inexorable disappearance. People actually do inhabit these images but only by inference and allusion; and in many ways, it's this physical absence from which the work draws its strength. Impressions are made at a more elemental depth, below explicit communication, echoing that most universal of all human experiences: the inexorable passage of time what's left behind in its wake. It's an approach that has spilled over into a number of my other projects regardless of subject matter.

Alex: I feel both you express 2 different, yet similar variations of “time and place” outside of a so-called “ordinary” context. What are your thoughts on this idea of “time and place” and why are these particular subjects so suited to express these ideas?

Mark: To great extent, I feel like the decontextualization of the structures from place and hopefully time makes the images more open to interpretation or at least adaptation into the viewer's own personal narrative. One of the most memorable comments I ever received about the project was from a German editor that I was working with. She'd grown up in Germany and had never been to the Jersey Shore but after looking at the work she said: “I feel like I've been there.” These images are only coincidentally from the same island. In a lot of ways, they could be anywhere. There's nothing else about Wildwood as a place in the book. Nothing about the beach or one of the major features of the island, its boardwalk. There are no cars, no people. Aside from a few telltale pieces of infrastructure, it's hard to tell when many of the images were shot. That was very intentional on my part. I wanted these images to almost exist outside of place and time.

Alex: Finally, the age-old question, what did you set out to achieve vs what ended up coming out of it? I am always conscious of ideas taking shape and evolving throughout a particular project, and wondering if you felt the same way.

Mark: When I started I just wanted to capture some tiny remnant of these places that I remembered from my childhood before they disappeared. To be honest, I began to photograph the motels only very reluctantly. At the start of the project I wasn't making art, I had no experience with photography and I wasn't interested in learning. So I paid a professional photographer to come down to Wildwood with me to shoot the motels that I pointed at. The results were fine, but there was just something about them that wasn't getting what I was after. So after exhausting every other possibility, I grudgingly purchased a secondhand 35mm camera from a store called Happy Photo and started – very tentatively – making photographs. As soon as

I began though, it was like someone flipped a switch. I'd suddenly found a medium with this wondrous immediacy to it that I'd never known before. It was exhilarating. The photographs I was making were terrible, but I'd found a medium that I could create with. In that way, it's been invaluable as a project. It was the start of everything for me.

Alex Phucas with Billy Cress

Alex: What makes the title “American Assemblies” so apt for this particular dual showing?

Billy: To me, *American Assemblies* accurately explains our two separate projects of Jersey Coast architecture. Each project is about collecting and preserving these beautiful, and dying structures in still photographs.

Alex: Can you elaborate on the beauty you each see in your respective subject matter? For example, why are these things beautiful to you when they're in their “off-season” or “closed down” state as opposed to when they are or were occupied/operational?

Billy: I enjoy the quiet that comes with the offseason at the shore. My project became as much about personal time as it did about photography. I drive down every weekend starting Black Friday, pick a town, and walk. It's relaxing and much needed. The subject matter is partially a collecting project and partially simple observational photography. The mid century beach homes are few and far between and dying each year. This collecting project is an extension of a project I work on in Philadelphia.

Alex: As photographers, what are you trying to capture in terms of “remembering”?

Billy: Like my response in question 2, a good part of this project is collecting and preserving what's left of these beautiful homes and structures.

Alex: I feel both you express 2 different, yet similar variations of “time and place” outside of a so-called “ordinary” context. What are your thoughts on this idea of “time and place” and why are these particular subjects so suited to express these ideas?

Billy: The idea of time and place is best illustrated in the photos i'm showing of Atlantic City. They visually describe what's going on with development along the coast. The old beach houses stick out among the new plastic, modern homes lining every block in every town.

Alex: Finally, the age-old question, what did you set out to achieve vs what ended up coming out of it? I am always conscious of ideas taking shape and evolving throughout a particular project, and wondering if you felt the same way.

Billy: I set out to have some alone time in a place I frequented growing up. After a very long time of not visiting I returned for a nostalgic walk, and this time with my camera. What I chose to take pictures of just sort of unfolded like it always does.