

ArtReview

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*For
Richard
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to
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THE FAME GAME

Richard Prince pictures
the American dream

Who's on the New York art map?
Sex, lies and video art: a short story
PLUS: Brice Marden, Banks Violette and Agnès b



Emotional wrecks

Jay Merrick sees life and loss in Dan Dubowitz's ruins

The photography of architecture is often an exercise in deceit designed to emphasize one thing rather than all things, or to fashion a very specific myth that punches the override button to erase uncontrolled reality. One thinks of the photographers who sterilized modernist architecture, or over-dramatized it in a speciously graphic manner – made it an emotional void, in other words. How differently one responds to the photographs of Dan Dubowitz, images that precisely delineate the ruinous end of architecture, in pursuit of what he describes as the “presence of absence” It is something that visitors to Manchester's CUBE Gallery will get the chance to experience when his “Wastelands: Three Sanctuaries” show opens on 18 June.

But why are we fascinated with decay? Why does rubble sometimes seem more interesting than the building it once was? It's partly because our powers of perception are

increasingly consumerist; we are less and less aware of what's around us; we tend to be reductive because we lead increasingly pressured and passive lives. In architecture, buildings may take years to build – but, when the time comes, they can vanish in hours. After that, what are we to think about buildings that once existed?

Dubowitz gives us extraordinarily detailed freeze-frames that encourage us to delve through the dust and grunge. We do so willingly and hopefully, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary, as if the buildings were still viable organisms.

Dubowitz reminds us that architecture is not only about firmness, commodity and delight, but also about time. Once that ingredient is factored in, form and solidity develop a different meaning, something as sombre and tender. That is precisely the tug of his images. To gaze at the container-load of statues from Gorton monastery – ashen, downcast, bathed in albumen-like light – is

to know unmistakable ruin and finality, yet to refuse to believe that it is empty of life.

Dubowitz's photographs are not a critique of vainglorious architecture, although the temptation to brand the brutalist Modernism of the carcass of Cardross seminary with this label is strong. Its foolishly glazed ground-floor façades were unsuited to the Scottish winters, and this triumph of design over humane function was closed down within years.

But we ignore all this when we look at the seminary images. We want it to live again; we are made to imagine that impossibility; we fret away trying to smell those dank walls, touch the acid yellow flecks of psoriasis-cum-paint on the walls of the bedrooms, splash through the indigo gashes of water below the altar. In these pictures we experience the palimpsests of various cultures and aspirations, once contained within architectural forms. Here is the infinite fragility of loss, and the more delicate it is – look at the subtle gradations and textures of the greens and yellows around the altar at Manchester's defunct Gorton monastery – the more alive it seems.

Dan Dubowitz, Wastelands, The Presence of Absence 2: Three Sanctuaries, is published by Civic Works Press, £12 (www.civicworks.net)

Below: Dan Dubowitz, *Parked Car, Cardross, 2003*, lambda print on lightbox, 1.3m x 1.3m x 0.15m

