

## **Presents of the Past:**

an interview with Raúl Ortega Ayala by Nat Muller

**Nat Muller:** Over the course of four years you've visited the Ukrainian town of Pripyat, a so-called nuclear city developed in the 1970s in the USSR to serve the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Since the 1986 nuclear disaster the city has become a ghost town, which is hauntingly shown in your photographs and in your film. Can you speak a little about what first sparked your interest in lost cities, how you prepared for your first visit to Pripyat and what made the most impact on you?

**Raúl Ortega Ayala:** As you know my work is derived from researching and exploring specific topics for long periods of time. Four years ago I began a series titled *From the Pit of Et Cetera*, which I wanted to devote to the study of Social Amnesia, a term we owe to the American historian Russell Jacoby, which could be described briefly as the collective forgetting prompted by different factors. One of the first projects (which I'm still developing) was to make a film about a small town that was going to disappear in the north of Mexico because of the building of a dam nearby. Visiting this place sparked an interest in places that were already derelict and in understanding the reasons why they had been abandoned. This took me to the 30 Kilometre Exclusion Zone in the Ukraine where I saw many forsaken towns and monumental structures.

The preparations for visiting The Zone offered different challenges because I knew no one in the area, I knew nothing about radiation and did not speak the language either; it was completely uncharted territory for me in all aspects. So I had to learn about the topic and find people to help me on the other side, and I was fortunate enough to find a great team. When I finally got there, what struck me the most was the uncanny familiarity of it all. Being born in a place like Mexico means that you are in constant contact with ruins, it is part of what makes our culture, but you don't necessarily relate to them as you do with these 'neo-ruins' because these ones are just like the environments in which we live, these types of buildings still exist all over the world and the layout of the city is so similar to the cities we live in that you relate to them on a different level. And this familiarity becomes a sort of window into viewing your present circumstances as a ruin; it's a humbling experience.

**NM:** How in your follow-up visits to Pripyat did you go about developing a conceptual methodology to document absence? For example, how did you decide what to leave in and what to leave out, and what kind of responsibility does such an editorial process place on you as an artist, who willingly or perhaps unwillingly becomes a chronicler of disappearance?

**ROA:** When I start a project, although I research the subject matter beforehand, I don't have a preconceived idea of what I will do with this research nor do I have a specific idea of what the outputs might be. This comes with time and with experiencing directly the matter in question. In this case it took several visits to the place to understand what, out of all the things that could be said about this place, I wanted to work with. The unsettling familiarity with the ruins I mentioned

before, the absence, unearthing lost stories, the disintegration of communities, the harrowing facts and the inevitable takeover of nature were all issues I found interesting and wanted to work with. So I decided to capture a lot of footage on film, trace people who lived there during the Chernobyl accident and interview them and visit the exclusion zone several times and in different seasons. I also took numerous amounts of photographs with the help of my friend and long-time collaborator Roberto Rubalcava (which at some point will turn into a book). But capturing material was just the beginning of the process, the difficult part came afterwards when (as you well asked) I, paradoxically working with what is and isn't remembered, became the entity that decided what was left in and what was left out. As an artist one is allowed the liberty to portray things in any way one feels suited but I felt a certain responsibility to convey the stories I was told and to disseminate what had happened there to a wider public. Hence my interest in making a film with a conventional narrative structure.

**NM: What kind of logistical challenges did you encounter filming in an exclusion zone? What kind of restrictions did you face and what kind of precautions did you have to take?**

**ROA: When I began the project in 2013 the conflict between the Ukraine and Russia had not started, it began once we were well into it. So for example I had a specific interest in filming from a helicopter in order to show the scope of this disaster but we couldn't because any flights near or within The Zone were completely banned, so we had to film with drones and by that time there weren't many options available to do this but we luckily found a great guy who built his own machinery and did it with him. We also had a time restriction for being in The Zone (we had to leave at 5pm every day) and needed to travel with a guide at all times who knew what areas were safe to enter and which ones were highly radioactive and dangerous and also kept a constant eye on the radiation levels with a device. It was also recommended to not spend long periods of time in The Zone, so we were only able to work for a week at most and then had to spend time away.**

**NM: In the photographs you show us a world after disaster in which human presence and the life the inhabitants of Pripyat led are but faint traces. What always strikes me about ruin is that it undoes our sense of time; it erases history. What visual strategies did you find most effective to convey a sense of lived experience and history and counter forgetfulness?**

**ROA: The most effective one I found was to make a film with a voice-over narrative in which people told the stories of what their life was like back then and juxtaposed it with footage that followed the characters around whilst they showed us the places where they lived, studied, played, etc. This juxtaposition helped to take the spectator for a walk through the present and the past.**

**NM: How then do the interviews and narratives dialogue with the photographs, and how does your interest of working with anthropological methodologies contribute to the project as a whole?**

ROA: The film and the photographs deal with the same issue but allow you to relate to the place differently. With the film you relate directly to the people who lived there and with the place in general and with the photographs you are able to contemplate different places or moments that aren't in the film and you can also dwell on the details and stop and think about the issues that go beyond the personal stories.

My previous experience of working with anthropological methods helped me a lot on this project as it had similar elements to that of an ethnography: I had to immerse myself in a place where I didn't know the language nor all of its history and was given important and personal information by people and had to act responsibly and ethically with that information.

NM: The aerial views, the voice-overs, the zooming in and out in the film all contribute to a sense of disembodiment. What becomes clear through the narratives is the secrecy and cover-up the whole disaster was shrouded in. The authorities literally kept the inhabitants in the dark. Your project poetically documents history, place, time and loss foremost, but how would you describe the political undercurrents of the project and how they are manifested? Is the film for you also a political document? In other words how does the project situate itself, if at all, vis-à-vis Soviet and cold war politics of evasion and concealment?

ROA: The film never had a script; it was constructed on the go and bit by bit during each visit. This meant gathering testimonies, information and footage in order to piece it together later. When that process came, what struck me the most was that every character emphasised one way or another a general disbelief that this could have happened. And I found this very interesting as it indirectly reflected a parallel belief at the time that the technology behind nuclear power was as infallible as their (the Soviet's) political system. So more than a historical document I feel the film touches on the disenchantment of things that are held as certain.

NM: In the exhibition you also show paintings based on X-ray images of well-known paintings taken by museum staff as part of their scientific research. These X-rays reveal paintings beneath paintings, often quite different than the one on display. You could say that you have unearthed a ghost image that was never supposed to be found. What does it mean to wake up those ghosts in terms of how we read images and how we view the artist's intent? What does it mean for discussions on authenticity?

ROA: Even though an artist might have decided to erase a painting or cover it with another one for specific reasons, I find value in the relationships that appear between what is concealed and what covers it. For example in the paintings shown in this exhibition, the X-ray from the Van Gogh painting of a still life with meadow flowers reveals two wrestlers struggling with one another. In the painting by the Le Nain brothers a portrait of a prominent and possibly rich figure is revealed under the painting of four figures of less economic means eating a scant meal and the glacier landscape of Hodges exists under a painting of a boat moored in a lush harbor in New Zealand. Of course these are particular readings

that each painting has in terms of the juxtaposed images it contains but what I'm also interested in is in creating a constant flux where the present becomes the past and the past becomes the present.

NM: What I find really interesting here is that the actual source paintings (or any type of visual documentation referencing them for that matter) are visually absent in this project. So somehow we only know these Van Gogh, Hodges and Le Nain brothers associatively by their titles or by memory. As is the case with X-rays they make something unseen appear by making something visible disappear. In other words, there's always this exchange happening. Can you comment on why you have excluded, at least visually, the cover paintings? The relationship between what is concealed and its cover becomes – for the viewer at least – speculative. This dynamic is fascinating and complex, but it also places you, the artist, in a position of visual knowledge that the viewer is to an extent excluded from.

ROA: The relationship with the origin of these paintings is accounted for in the title as all works are named after the painting that covers it, and I felt that that was enough to create the link between the two. At the same time it creates a disconnection between what is being seen and what is read and it opens up a dialogue between something present and something absent, giving the paintings a dissociative identity, which is something I'm very interested in.

NM: The X-ray is a technology that makes visible what is hidden and unseen. How does this technology operate in your practice vis-à-vis your use of the photo and film camera: technologies that record what is present in front of the lens?

ROA: More than a relationship between the technologies and the mediums I use, I find that the X-ray paintings and the Chernobyl series both derive and/or are related to radiation. In both cases radiation reveals a zone where the present and past interact with each other.

In general the works that derive from this series have taught me that there is a lot to learn from obsolescence and from the detritus of history.

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Nat Muller is an independent curator and critic. Her main interests are the politics of representation, contemporary art from the Middle East, and food. She is contributing editor for *Ibraaz* and regularly contributes to magazines like *Springerin*, *MetropolisM*, *ArtAsiaPacific* and others. She has also written numerous catalogue and monographic essays on artists from the Middle East. She has taught at universities and academies in the Netherlands and the Middle East and has curated exhibitions and screening programs internationally.