

## Curtis Mann: *Modifications*

by: Karsten Lund

In our age travel has become an ordinary activity and our very sense of distance unravels as information is served to us in real time through satellite signals or fiber-optic cables. Local differences still exist, certainly, but this doesn't diminish the feeling that far-off places are within reach or that we're tapped into current events in every corner of the globe. The role photographs play in this situation is clearly substantial. As Susan Sontag observed, "The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past...What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds." (1) Nevertheless, for those of us accustomed to comfort and stability in our home countries, the wars and violent conflicts that happen elsewhere are still a distant reality, disconnected from our daily experience. Many of us don't have an effective personal reference point, even as we continue to build a camera-mediated knowledge of war.

In the series *Modifications* Curtis Mann appropriates and refashions vernacular photographs of Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Kenya—places where a conflict seems deeply rooted, never ending, and even impossible to fix, at least to a casually informed outsider. Mann states, "I question what I've learned about these places and I realize I usually have to erase most of that knowledge and begin again—more open-minded, more curious, and more hopeful than before." (2) As he submits these found images to a sequence of physical interventions, Mann challenges our expectations, or our mental pictures, of what these conflicts look like. Because his photographs resist a sense of stable meaning they invite individual interpretation and a general consideration of what it means to live in a place overcome by war, providing a provisional counter-model to the process Sontag describes.

After collecting photographs from photo-sharing websites, estate sales, and online auctions, Mann enlarges them and paints certain parts of the photographs with a clear varnish. When he submerges these prints in household bleach, the varnished areas resist the bleach while the untreated portions of the image are washed away. As a result, large sections of each photograph are replaced by a bright white void or a blank space ready for projection, while at its edges gradients of red and yellow bear faint traces of the original image. The varnished areas depict clusters of people or fragments of buildings, fully visible but isolated in these otherworldly landscapes. Finally, in some cases Mann crumples the paper or draws in new boundaries with pencil, as if re-envisioning the topography of the landscape. The color palette and bleached effect lend the depictions an

apocalyptic guise—the world reduced to a vacuum and rendered in flames—but particular images have whimsical or dreamlike qualities that complicate the overall tone.

In the early days of photography, Victorian-age professionals like Francis Frith would fill a caravan with equipment and tour the farther reaches of the world, bringing back photographs of exotic and hopelessly remote lands to armchair travelers at home. In the current era, when nothing seems so distant anymore, Mann offers us new visions of a remarkably alien world that is nonetheless our own. But although his individual images emerge as ciphers, each one subject to close inspection and contemplation, there is a profound unifying effect that emerges in the series: the different countries depicted in his source images lose their specificity as Mann reshapes them with a new, common visual vocabulary. Even if you can sporadically glimpse elements that reveal particular locations, these different places effectively merge into a universal conflict zone. In this regard the series becomes an allegorical, humanistic reflection on the effects of violence on larger scale.

The question remains, how can you gain real insight into the nature of conflict if your own experiences are incredibly different—if one's perspective is inevitably, for all intents and purposes, that of a foreign tourist? Mann's outlook is admittedly ambivalent. These photographs do not comprise an effort to discover a deeper, hidden truth, per se; more so they are an evocative set of interpretations that grapple with the general ambiguity and malleability of information, and particularly photographs. One of Mann's early projects—in which he first began experimenting with bleaching processes—entailed modifying his own family's snapshots. Mann states, "I knew first hand they were supposed to represent something that was different than what I experienced. There was so much more history, trauma, sadness, happiness than exists in those pictures. The only way to get to those places was through fiction."<sup>(3)</sup> For the series *Modifications* Mann's focus shifts from family history to social conditions on a broader level, but he brings the same awareness of photography's limits and continues to explore the interrelatedness of fiction and document.

Notably, Mann continues to work from vernacular photographs for the new series, turning to appropriated snapshots rather than news footage or photojournalists' depictions of war. In part this is because the mundane photographs he acquires are not created by professionals with the intention to convey meaning quickly and efficiently. Instead they usually have a personal logic that is not fully evident. As Mark Alice Durant writes, "Lacking narrative context, the found photograph is loosened from its emotional anchor, and floats like a cheap apparition, familiar yet elusive."<sup>(4)</sup> The ambiguous found images that Mann chooses to work with each bring a half-told story rather than a direct account of an event, and in turn Mann filters them through his own visual vocabulary, opening them up for viewers to engage in their own search for meaning. The process involves a complex

negotiation between photography's documentary capacity and its suggestive, fictionalizing properties, and more generally a give and take between creation and destruction. As the bleach strips the picture away Mann probes the limits of photographic credibility. Everything that remains in his photographs takes on a new metaphorical charge. In this regard, the artist guides us towards a tangible engagement with the photographic image itself and heightens our sense of its vulnerabilities. Showing photography to be an eminently pliable medium, Mann provides a gentle reminder that digital imaging might not be such a new world after all. (5)

Mann's hope for the *Modifications* series is to facilitate a more abstract, inquisitive, or even imaginative consideration of war-torn places. He shapes his photographs through substantial physical alterations and they become objects with a tactile presence, eliciting a more visceral experience of the work that goes beyond our encounters with images on a TV or computer screen. Meanwhile, the openness of his images resist the reductive narratives of so-called collective memory, allowing us to consider other possibilities. In the end, the figures in his images occupy an unstable world that veers perilously towards physical annihilation, but a human presence remains. Even as war continues to be an undeniable, and perhaps unconquerable reality, these photographs suggest that individuals carry on and hope prevails—and that we all might be part of that.

(1) Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 85-6.

(2) Personal correspondence with the artist, July 29, 2008.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Mark Alice Durant, "The Material in Question," in *Marco Breuer: Early Recordings*, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2007), p. iii.

(5) I owe these final insights to Rod Slemmons, who raises them in a text for the Silverstein Photography Annual. Accessed August 17, 2008.

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