

Being There

By Stacy Davies

There are many factors that contribute to our identity. The most obvious might be our relationships to other people—our parents, siblings, friends, teachers and even strangers on the street. All of these connections create deeply ingrained feelings of love and fear within us, and help us define who we think we are. Equally important, yet probably less obvious, is our connection to environment: the city we live in, the street we live on and the home where we lay our heads each night. These places constitute our “personal geography,” the sense of identity we associate with belonging to this place or that—or not belonging—and each environment tells us something equally important about who we are, and even how other people might perceive us.

At the UCR/California Museum of Photography, curator Lisa Henry explores this location-relation in “**ON-SITE**,” a broad, landscape-based character study by photographers Sheila Pree Bright, Stella Kalaw and **Susanna Pozzoli**; and video artist lauren woods. Using the new media available at the museum’s Digital Studio, each artist’s photos are shown in a series on five flat screen panels instead of through traditional matte exhibiting. The results are compelling; while the content of the photos is captivating, the very fact that these images appear on screens with light emanating from them gives each image an unusual quality of immediacy; where framed photos might feel like captured moments in time, these digital images seem as if they are happening right now, to us, in real time.

Pozzoli’s interiors of buildings and homes include no people, only places where people once were, perhaps even moments before. There are vacant classrooms, barren basketball courts, unseated diner counters and empty stairwells, living rooms and lavatories. Some homes are elegant, with sculpture pieces on mantels, velvet chairs and oil paintings on the high-ceilinged walls. Others are humble: small rooms with a single chair and fan or stacks of LP records and a boom box, and a bathroom with a lonely window half ajar in the blue light of morning. This is Harlem, and these places exist on 121st

Street between Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard—the specific block on which the Italian artist lives and chose to call her U.S. home three years ago. As more upper middle-class families move in and uproot the natives, the landscape is changing, and these are the homes and buildings that are both evolving, and disappearing before her eyes.

Bright's images invite us into the geographical identities of specific people—although the people themselves, when included, are only represented by their reflections in mirrors or by parts of their bodies. We are meant to see the landscape with them in it; we are not allowed to divorce them from it. Born in Atlanta (which she refers to as a "black town"), Bright was raised in Germany and returned to her Southern birthplace almost 15 years ago. For her, showing the average middle-class black family was paramount—this is the world in which she lives, and one that few outsiders know exist. Indeed, our media culture is so devoid of "normal" images of black families that scenes of a teenage girl laying on a bed in an elegant and sophisticated room (her face obscured by the technology magazine she's reading) almost seems like a novelty. Other rooms in this classic home show cultured decorating and style—sometimes we see the legs and feet of a woman, sometimes the back of her head from another room and in one, we see a wall of oak-framed family photos. The fact that these images are mostly intriguing because they come from black homes should give all observers pause for reflection—and that is what Bright intends.

Video and installation artist lauren woods is also concerned with gentrification and black communities in flux. When *Nola Awoke*, the first video chapter in a larger work about New Orleans, is a haunting piece of abstract editing, often using over-exposed footage. Individuals are barely present—a pair of hands tying up a fabric banner—and there is no sound. The effect is displacing and eerie—we are ghosts walking through the broken-down home of someone who really is invisible to our mass culture and utterly forgotten.

Stella Kalaw's landscape photos of her neighboring town of Emeryville, continue this obscured pathway, taking us into the foggy terrain and seaside shores of the San Francisco Bay. Undisturbed, at present, by human form, the moody images of square rocks in shallow waters, groups of trees ripe for apparitions and dirt trails fading off into misty horizons seem to invite connection, as if asking

the observer to include them in a personal history. It is a dialogue in which Kalaw is fully engaged, and like her peers in this exhibit, one that she uses to inform and define her identity. The process is never-ending for all of us, in fact, a continual dance of association and detachment that moves us through the literal landscapes of our lives, and the emotional reckonings of our soul. And it's all about location. "ON-SITE" exhibition at the UCR/California Museum of Photography, 3824 Main St., Riverside, (951) 827-4787; www.cmp.ucr.edu. Thru Aug. 22. Museum hours Tue-Sat, noon-5PM. \$3.

Posted June 17, 2010 in [Arts & Culture](#)

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