The revision of vision

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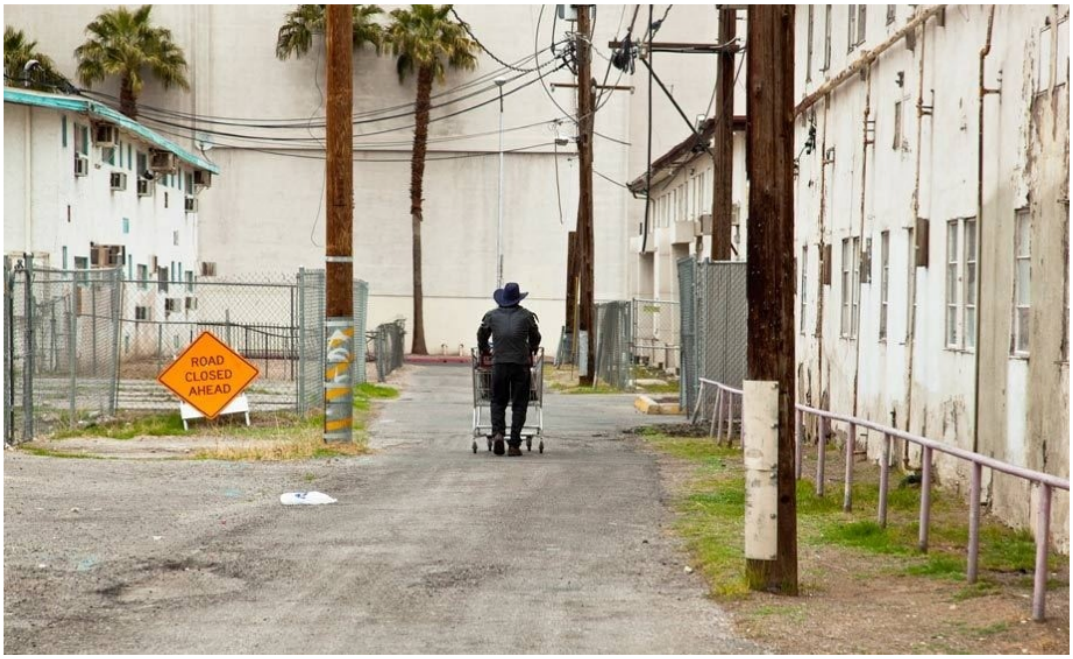
> This investigation of the space–between the personal and the universal, the particular and the general, the local and the global, the familiar and the foreign–is crucial to my progress as an artist.[1]



In one of Oren Lukatz's most compelling photographs, a man in a black cowboy hat pushes a shopping cart into a cul-de-sac of nondescript, beat-up looking white buildings, oblivious of the camera's scopic eye. A sign leaning against a fence declares "Road Closed Ahead"— an effective title for this strange, liminal space that suggests the bare backside of a stage set. The disparate elements present in this picture interrupt stereotypes of the American West even as they draw us into a story, like a still from a film.

In this unsettling vision of loneliness and loss, the only other sign of life is the line of scruffy-looking palm trees growing as if by sheer willpower in front of the building towards which the black-clad urban 'cowboy' trudges. Palms are a familiar motif in pictures of the altered landscapes of the American West and South. Like exclamation points, their slender branchless trunks and brushy tops punctuate images of cities and suburbs from

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[1] Oren Lukatz, *Body of Work Analysis*, 2012

California to Florida, often signifying a particular kind of climate and place: an oasis, you might say, of one kind or another, implying pleasure in the form of vacations or entertainment. Hidden within this relatively frivolous set of meanings, however, is the fact that palms, as a sign of nearby water, can represent survival itself.

The presence of these desert natives in places like Las Vegas or Los Angeles seems natural and God-given, but it is not. Like most of the human residents of the West, palms are immigrants (having originated far away, in the tropics and the Middle East). In a recent interview, Lukatz commented on the affinity he feels with these secretly-out-of-place presences in the urban landscape. Born and raised in Israel, he now lives near San Francisco, where he fits into the area's multiethnic population.

Still, Lukatz feels the unease of a man who is part of two worlds but belongs, really, to neither and both at the same time. His pictures reflect this sense of being resident and tourist, and the peculiar sharpness of vision that such a point of view confers. Photographs are documents—a kind of evidence of a time or place. They are also vehicles of memory, since the moments they capture are instantly part of the past. At the same time, they can irrevocably shape the present, as we compare what *is* with what *was*. In Lukatz's Disneyland pictures of multiracial Snow Whites and superheroes, for example, we see this disjunction between memory and what is there in front of us. In plate x, the young boy at the left could be Lukatz himself, decades before. What we see here is his story—*history*—itself.

In 1978, Lukatz—then ten years old-- vacationed with his family in the United States. For six weeks, they drove across the vast distances of the country, marveling at its physical enormity and variety. Their visit to Disneyland made a particularly deep impression on him.

For years afterwards, he remembers poring over photo albums and watching the home movies his father had taken on this wonderful trip. At the same time, his adolescent perceptions were being shaped by the fantasy world of American culture as projected by film, television, and advertising, throughout the 1970s and '80s. He remembers wanting to live the American dream as he imagined it to be.

Decades later, to further his wife's educational plans, Lukatz moved his family to Las Vegas. This city was of particular interest to him; back in '78, his parents had left him with friends in Los Angeles when they went there, because 'Sin City' was not yet the "family" destination it has since become. Lukatz's sense of Las Vegas had been shaped by this second-hand experience —by hearing his parents' stories of the casinos and stage shows and by examining pictures of the city's glittering lights. He was eager to see it for himself. The place he experienced, however, was very different, not only

from the city his parents had seen, but from the Vegas visited by virtually all tourists who pass through in a day or two. Lukatz spent a year working behind the scenes, in the administration of one of the city's largest hotels. This insider's knowledge would prove instrumental in the kinds of photographs he would take there, beginning in 2009.

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> The photograph's realism is a symptom of its constant wavering between presence and absence. It is not merely the "truth-value" of photography, which makes it so affective. It is this attempt of or suggestion of truth coupled with all that is missing, past, lost, unknown, and unknowable.[2]

In many of Lukatz's pictures taken during the past three years, his subject is the landscape, mediated by the photographer's vision: from the artificial indoor world that mimics nature created within many casinos, to suburbia seen at night, with its topiarized shrubs and defined, eerily lit boundaries. In other series he features a parking lot against the big sky and mountains that surround Las Vegas (plate x), or various seedy, run-down and worn-out locations, including that image of a lone man in a cowboy hat pushing his shopping cart to nowhere.

Many of these pictures have a traceable relationship to the work of the photographers of the 'New Topographics' movement that emerged in the 1970s-- images known for a dispassionate, unromanticized presentation of landscape-as-visual information. While he was a graduate student at the San Francisco Art Institute, Lukatz studied with Henry Wessel, one of the most important 'New Topographers,' and saw the works included in the influential 1975 exhibition that gave the movement its name.[3]

For Lukatz, however, the positioning of his work within this particular context is highly nuanced, in that his images are by intention more emotionally-charged than those of the earlier photographers he admires. This is due in part to the fact that when he points his camera at the landscapes of his adopted country, he sees them through a scrim of nostalgia-- through memories that may or may not be his own, a kind of longing for the world projected by his teenaged imagination.

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[2] Christine Elfman, *Taking Pictures is Like Picking Flowers*, 2012

[3] This recreation of the original exhibition has toured internationally, including a stop at SFMOMA in 2010.

> In addition to romanticism (extreme or not) about the past, photography offers instant romanticism about the present. In America, the photographer is not simply the person who records the past but the one who invents it. [4]

It is interesting that three of the locations that have most fascinated Lukatz as a photographer all came into being, essentially, in the same post-World War II era as his native country, the modern state of Israel. Disneyland, conceived of by Walt Disney in the late forties, opened its doors in 1955. Las Vegas has existed since the 19th century as a town (of sorts), and began offering legalized gambling in the late thirties. But it was not until after the war that the Strip, a line of lavishly decorated hotels and casinos, came into existence, creating one of the world's most potent emblems of both glamor and excess. Finally, this same era saw the creation of the modern suburb, dozens of which expanded enormously nation-wide to accommodate a rising prosperity (and consumerism) that made home ownership possible for a broad swath of the middle and working classes.

The palm trees present in many of Lukatz's pictures are reminders that he lives in California—as much a state of mind as a state of the union, home of not only Disneyland and the movie business, but of San Francisco, a tourist destination that has willfully preserved its own quaintness and nostalgia quotient. Unmoved by such scenic wonders as cable cars or bridges, Lukatz focuses instead on the theme of single-family houses and automobiles made familiar through 'suburban' s pictures dating from the seventies onwards. But Lukatz photographs these scenes at night, a man and his camera on a lone quest. Instead of objectivity, his pictures exude desire—not for the houses or their contents, but for the warmth within those walls: for Home itself.

The old cars in these pictures, like the VW Bus in xx, can be read in different ways. (Lukatz has commented, for example, that vintage vehicles are almost unknown in Israel.) They evoke nostalgia for the world projected through movies and Disneyland: the peaceful, happy place that Lukatz imagined as a boy – transforming these pictures into reconstructions of memories he doesn't have.

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[4] Susan Sontag, On Photography, 1977, p.67

America's vastness has insulated its people from experiences familiar elsewhere— or did so, until the events of 9/11 necessitated the kind of vigilance that is a matter-of-fact part of life all over the world. Even so, the fantasy of invulnerability remains in places like Las Vegas and Disneyland, where time has no meaning and visitors feel 'safe' enough to spend freely with little thought for tomorrow. Where the operating premise is a kind of happiness that is completely illusory and fleeting: like the moment captured by a photograph.

Maria Porges, Oakland, CA, March, 2012