

SHELLBURNE THURBER: PHANTOM LIMB



Shellburne Thurber
Phantom Limb

At: Krakow Witkin Gallery,
10 Newbury St.,
through November 2nd.
617-262-4490,
krakowwitkingallery.com

left: Shellburne Thurber's "*Master Bedroom with Blue Chair*", 2019,

right: Shellburne Thurber's "*Geof and Steve holding hands*", 2019.

By Susan Boulanger

"Phantom limb" describes traumatic amputation and a consequent neurological haunting that renders the loss ambiguous and difficult to accept. As a name for Shellburne Thurber's exhibit of recent photographs in Krakow Witkin Gallery's serene, rational spaces, *Phantom Limb* seems rather provocative, demanding justification from the experience. Engagement with the deeply personal photographs in this quietly impactful installation, however, renders the title strangely apt for their elusive, enigmatic mood.

Most of the photographs depict interiors, many open to outdoor views or centered on the penetration of natural light, all installed against wall-sized murals of three photographs of nature--*Light Hitting Open Water*, *Dark Water* and *Moonlit Sky*. This enveloping, grounding context yokes what scholar Yve-Alain Bois calls "various degrees of perceptual velocity to narrative ends." The murals stand witness to the epochal, cyclical and universal, while the transient, contingent and ephemeral are brought forward image by image.

The interiors are emptied of human presence. No mug sits on the screened porch table, no book waits by bed or chair. Angels of sunlight and inrushing evening shadows mark diurnal rhythms, without even a streak of dust to suggest accumulating time. Yet the careful preservation of ordinary objects speaks of nothing else. A desk, empty of work yet bearing pale, vivifying light from a window, evokes absent presence, no-longer maintained habits. In other images, roads curve away through autumnal trees, or sunlight glazes woodland undergrowth, creating shadows all the deeper. Thurber, with the detachment necessary to see unsentimentally, captures what was once vital but now recedes inexorably into the past.

Gregory Crewdson notes that no photo "was ever made that doesn't speak about mortality." Progressing clockwise from the entrance, the last image seen was the first taken: *Geof and Steve Holding Hands*, a detail reproduced from a vintage black-and-white photograph from 50 years before, when the lives lived in the house were still unfolding and full of potential and surprise. Although twice removed, their subsequent relationship and lives unknown, the young brothers' tender gesture casts a retrospective glow, affirming the phantom limb of loving support, of persistence of what lies behind memory.

KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

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