

SPOT

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Harrowing Tranquilities

*Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible – images of Kosovo*

Photographs by Melanie Friend, Houston Center for Photography Sept 19-Nov. 1, 1998

British freelance photographer and sometime BBC radio reporter Melanie Friend has been visiting the Balkans since 1989. The region that gripped her at once, well before it began to make headlines, was Kosovo, whose autonomy was revoked by the government of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic that same year. Friend became familiar first-hand with the tactics of the Serbian police, who rapidly spread fear through the predominantly non-Serbian, Albanian Muslim population. As a result, her visits were generally brief and a bit clandestine, always subject to film confiscations and surveillance that put anyone who helped her potentially at risk (yet she won the confidence of many who went out of their way to help her).

She faced a dilemma that photography, dependent as it is on that which can be seen, is poorly suited to address: How do you photograph something that, within the bounds of reasonable safety, you cannot witness? Abductions took place quickly and at night over a geographically diffuse area, and there was no possibility of photographing in Serbian jails. Beatings and searches were random. Although certain areas would be closed off by the police – strong evidence that violence of some kind was being perpetrated – these events were carefully orchestrated to take place out of sight of anyone who might document it. Deprived at every turn of what journalists call “access,” she was unable to extract the kind of familiar, shock-based images of conflict, which usually depend upon the juxtaposition of signs connoting the conflicting parties, that are the daily grist of war photography. Nor was there much visual evidence that could give her material for post facto images: scars, burned homes, bodies and so on. She found a society characterized by fear, and the imminent threat that once the Serbian military forces were finished in Bosnia,, they would turn to the expulsion of non-Serbs in Kosovo - a fear that was to prove justified. But for Friend, the question remained: How does one photograph such a state of affairs? And given the humanitarian urgency of the situation, how does one do so in a way that can interrupt the visual monologue of news images and generate some measure of outrage to stop an atrocity?

She was certainly not the first photographer to face this question, but her response to it was one of the most imaginative and thought-provoking I have seen.

*“In the summer of 1993 I interviewed an elderly Albanian man in Kosovo who had been beaten up by Serbian police on the floor of his living room. A reproduction of Constable’s “Haywain” hung on the wall, and sun streamed through the window onto sheepskin rugs. His son, a farmer, had also been beaten up. The police had pinned him against the wall of the house and*

*threatened him with machine guns. As I left the house with its trimmed garden lawn and colourful flower beds, its deck chair on the verandah, I was reminded of English lawns and English gardens. In the village I saw several houses which had been abandoned by their owners, who had fled abroad. Even as far back as 1993, the Albanians I spoke to called this “slow-motion ethnic cleansing” by their rulers, the Serbs. I never forgot the sharp contrast between the beauty of that village and the terror of what I had heard. When I returned to the village in 1994, again for an all-too-brief visit (owing to the daily police patrols), the old man was dead. He had never recovered from the brutal blows he had received around the head, and in the back, with guns.”*

Friend built on that irony of the orderly domestic interior in which an obscene act had taken place, the rape of the family refuge, by photographing exclusively the interiors of homes and their immediate, private environs and juxtaposing them with transcribed testimony describing the abuses suffered under the Serbian police. She amplified the visual impression of serenity by photographing her scenes during full daylight, without artificial lights and in medium format, in which the square boundaries of the frame give the image the repose of symmetry. There are no people: To show a face, she says, would have exposed the person to potential harm. Yet she turns this limitation to her advantage by choosing photos of homes in which the tracings of individuals are more visible in the resident’s absence, for in such images the viewer relies on the décor, the furnishings and the personal knickknacks that are as idiosyncratic as one’s own. Friend printed her images small (12” x 12”), and framed them in unfinished wood without mattes or other borders. There are 16 images in the show, and although they are arranged linearly they are not in any way sequential. They are in a sense cells of a large visual body, which is a meta-image that is the whole of the show. Altogether, *Homes and Gardens* is about as low-key and understated as photography gets, let alone war photography. It is an antithesis. Friend is pointedly rejecting the overworked visual values of news photography and calling attention to her subject by the sheer distance she goes in that rejection.

... What gives the show its subtle, ominous power is the viewer’s knowledge that these photographs are not at all what they seem: these are crime scenes. The absence of the literal representation of the violent act or anything – or anybody – relating to its immediate consequences, the depiction of which virtually defines war photography, throws all that violence back onto the viewer’s imagination. This is of course far more fertile ground, and it is cultivated by Friend’s several layers of verbal contexts: her diminutive, thoughtful catalogue could be utilized to good effect in any course on photojournalism and, most centrally, her live tape of interviews with Albanian residents of Kosovo speaking about their troubles, sometimes in English, sometimes in Albanian, each identified on a gallery transcript only as “woman, age 37” or “student, age 18.” Their unassuming but often tense voices collapse distance and turn the *Homes and Gardens* from a photo exhibit into a politically charged installation. The anonymity of the voices and the lack of a literal connection to the photos – we are not told whether or not the interviews relate to one or more of the homes photographed – generalize the images, making them Friend’s metonyms for Kosovar experience: “This is where we live; this is what is happening to us; we would show you our faces if we could.”

Beyond the immediate strength of the installation, *Homes and Gardens*' very success stimulates broader questions about the conventions of photo-documentary in conflict situations. If one accepts the premise that photography and exhibiting the immediate suffering of others is morally acceptable only if the intent of both photographer and viewer is to collapse a sense of "other-ness" that leads to ameliorative effort (without this one is left with voyeurism, "war-nography"), then has "straight" documentary photography – and particularly the news-oriented 35mm variety – become an exhausted medium whose visual tune has become a drone? If not, then why, with ever more photography of conflict to be seen, and the consequent opportunities for "awareness" ever more, that it is, with notable exceptions, so ineffective? Or is the problem that viewers are presented time after time with only victims – as we are, obliquely, in *Homes and Gardens* – for which no amount of empathy can aid in developing the practical understanding of the victimizers' motives, which might help us understand the root, rather than the fruit, of the problem? (Many photo-journalists are keenly aware of this, but there is a methodological problem, particularly for those on a publications deadline: the perpetrators of violence hold power in the situation and often control access to their acts, whereas the victims are eager to have their situation literally "exposed" in hopes of alleviation by those capable of checking the perpetrator.) Yet it is further possible that the problem lies neither with the medium nor with the methods of its practitioners but rather with its two main sets of users – publishers who too often fear challenging readers, and readers content to pay for drivel, both of whom on the mass scale result in news publications that with few exceptions exhibit bovine reliance on the most basic, iconic visual tropes. Now, if these are not relevant questions, then why is Friend's presentation and contextualization so methodologically refreshing and intriguing, so moving?

Early this year, when the onset of NATO'S bombing of Serbia led to the increased Serb repression that virtually emptied Kosovo of non-Serbian Kosovars, *Homes and Gardens* passed from current events to history. Now, just as Friend forces us to imagine what happened in the interiors she depicts, so we must also imagine what has happened to these homes and families. This brings up two ironies. First, as Kosovars return to their lands and what is left of their homes, it is the Serbs in the province, those who collaborated actively or passively with the brutality about them, that now fear retribution from the neighbors they thought had been driven out for good. The line between justice and vengeance may be blurry, yet in the coming years it is hardly inconceivable that there may be cause for a Serbian version of *Homes and Gardens*, as the centuries-old Balkan cycle of abuse enters a new phase. Secondly, because *Homes and Gardens* is specific to its historical time, it can be viewed more easily as a work-in-progress in Friend's ongoing documentation in the Balkans. This year, she has made two trips to photograph and assist her friends who were among the refugees – not necessarily in that order. She was shooting in the refugee camps of Macedonia in May and June, again in medium format. Yet the situation has inspired something of a forced inversion of her subject matter: With the Kosovars stripped of the domiciles that appear in *Homes and Gardens*, she has turned to the portrait – the very type of photograph she longed to make but could not so long as her subjects lived under Serbian authority.

It is easy to succumb to the popular myth that communications and imaging technology are making the world ever more accessible to being contained in words and images, as if quantity of representation might threaten to seduce us by sheer volume into believing that no stone remains unturned. *Homes and Gardens* reminds us of the limitations of our conventional representational strategies while thoughtfully pointing to expanded possibilities for documentary media.

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