A Subtle Beyond

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2013, mother and daughter Lihie and Ruti Talmor travelled to Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, walking in the footsteps of a young, not-yet-famous Elvis Presley. The journey was a quest for something much larger than him. Using Roland Barthes' notion of the punctum, Ruti investigates how Lihie Talmor's photogravure of Dauphin Island shows us how the layering of time and loss creates the meaning of place.

A SUBTLE BEYOND

Dauphin Island is a photogravure made by my mother, Lihie Talmor, in 2017, based on a digital photograph she took in July 2013. We were on Dauphin Island to mark the end of our stay in Mobile County, Alabama, the first stop on a thirteen-day trip through Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee, tracing the hauntings and footsteps of Elvis Presley. The plan was simple and purposely open-ended: choose a place where Elvis had performed in the brief single year between anonymity and spectacular fame, photograph the location, and find and interview people who had crossed paths with him. In so doing, we aimed to understand the ineffable element that made Elvis Presley move us and so many others in the way that he did, to find the immensity of his presence / absence. My mother, the artist, would turn the photographs into prints; I, the anthropologist, would turn interviews and fieldnotes into an account of our journey. Together, these modes of representation form Ria, an artist book about places as wounds of absence.

PLACE

We (photographer and viewer) stand on a sandy beach. Before us, the landscape arrays itself in horizontal layers in a strangely compressed graphic space. The composition is so centered, so balanced, that it feels almost like a postcard, or a Victorian travelogue photograph, taken by someone using a new technology, confronting an unfamiliar landscape.

In the foreground, which takes up nearly half the frame, pale, silky sand appears permanently sculpted—literally etched—into a windswept pattern of undulating lines that curve away from us toward the horizon. This paradoxical texture and its silvery near-colourlessness, both produced by photogravure's fine grain and remarkable tonal range, are the most seductive part of the image. It reminds me, in a visceral way, of seeing sand art

Figure 1

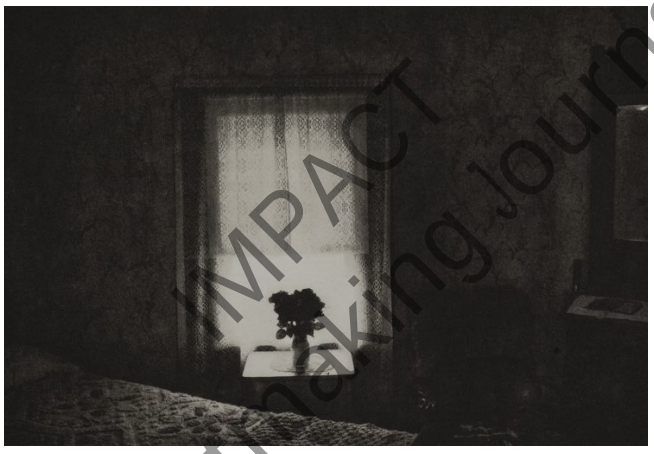

Figure 2

Figure 1. From the series: Everything remembered is dear, everything remembered is there, 2017-2018 by Lihie Talmor. Audubon Bird Sanctuary, Dauphin Island, Mobile, Alabama. Photogravure. 18.5 x 27.5cm
Figure 2. From the series: Everything remembered is dear, everything remembered is there, 2017-2018 by Lihie Talmor. The Elvis Presley Birthplace, Tupelo, Mississippi. Photogravure. 18.5 x 27.5cm

as a child: the inexplicable magic of layers of colored sand dripped into glass bottles, forever held in place, never to mix.

Next is a variegated vegetation layer. Sea oats (uniola paniculata) blow from left to right; the tufted grass moved by the wind casts shadows like hair. Photogravure's grain solidifies the transient; its continuous tone creates confusion between light, matter and air. Further back, the sea oats thicken into a single texture, their seed heads bowing above them. Behind these are at least two different habitats: a layer of bush, and further still, a maritime pine forest. From their centre rises a dark, leafless tree—maybe dead, hollowed-out, burned in a fire? The tree is transformed by the print into a transhistorical graphic, reminiscent of a Gothic element in a 1950s Disney cartoon; its size and dark silhouette makes us question the scale of what surrounds it.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Finally, the sky. Along the horizon, a belt of clouds moves in the opposite direction to the grasses and the sand, a mystery that occurred when the photograph was taken, not when the print was made. Above them, a cloudless belt of sky. Again, photogravure's grain turns blue air into gray matter, making the immaterial tangible.

That is it; that is all there is. And yet, there is something haunting, pulling, drawing me inexorably back to the image. Time seems to be caught inside it, like a secret or a code. We felt this when we stood on the beach, and the print now preserves this impression.

We spent three full, intense days in Mobile County, tracing a week Elvis spent there in late October 1955. To mark the end of our stay, it felt right to go to Dauphin Island, one of ends—and beginnings—of North America, a last tiny sliver of land before the vastness of the Gulf.

It was one of those places haunted by past presences, by first and final steps. Dauphin Island is a landing place, the first place of North American landfall for many birds migrating from the South. Four hundred and twenty of Alabama's four hundred and forty-five documented species of birds have been sited there (National Audubon Society). It was first visited by a European in 1519, and in 1699, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, 'the man responsible for "planting" the fleur-de-lis on the Gulf of Mexico' (Rogers, 1994, 25) found a large pile of bones on the island and misnamed it 'Île du Massacre' (Massacre Island) when in fact he had come upon an uncovered Mobilian (Chickasaw) burial mound. It is said that the first Africans to arrive in Alabama as slaves docked at Dauphin Island in 1719: it was the first place of North American landfall for them too. So many routes led—and ended—there.[1]

When we first came to this Southeastern edge of America, we learned that, geologically, this is the youngest part of the continent—the place that most recently emerged from water. As you travel through this country, air, water and land—which elsewhere are such opposites—are easily mistaken, just as they are this print. This comingling of elements in the everydayness of the present is a warning: not only in geological

Figure 3. From the series: Everything remembered is dear, everything remembered is there, 2017-2018 by Lihie Talmor. Dauphin Island, Mobile, Alabama. Photogravure. 18.5 x 27.5cm
Figure 4. Photograph of Lihie printing with multidisciplinary artist and master printer Lothar Osterburg. Photograph by Elizabeth Brown.

time, but in a very possible future, this land will be water again, with all its pasts submerged. Roland Barthes described this 'anterior future…this will be and this has been', as the temporality that defines photography (2010, p. 96).

PUNCTUM

Lihie Talmor's work is almost always about (a quest for) place, and the loss of place to time. 'A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me,' Barthes says, to explain why certain images exert an attraction. 'It is not I who seek [the punctum] out … it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' (Barthes 2010, pp. 26-27). These words as well explain why Lihie, when confronted with particular places, takes certain images, which she then feels compelled to transform into photogravures, photo-lithographs, or photo-etchings. Often, these are "Photographs of Nothing" (an ongoing series by Talmor since 2006).

Instead, certain landscapes compel her to photograph, and then through printmaking techniques, to make 'place into metaphor, place as wound' (Talmor, in Pradas, 2014, my translation). In speaking of the role that the photographable moment plays in her process as a printmaker, she points to 'the inexplicable combination that sparks the taking of the image [which] includes things I saw or sensed but did not register. As the work on the etching begins, these enter as through a back door, like the intervals of silence in music or the events that do not make it into histories' (Talmor, in Ramos 2012, p. 18).

In our family, each of the past four generations has had to say goodbye to at least one beloved homeland. We are always looking for something lost. The places that beckon to be photographed are somehow recognizable. Something in the landscape—the way absence is present there—shoots out like an arrow. 'The punctum, then, is a kind of subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see' (Barthes, 2010, p. 59). Or maybe, it is the way the photogravure process, which captures the transience of air and wind and time, 'belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object…' (Barthes, 2010, p. xx).

Lihie, who spent years as a photo-etcher before turning to photogravure, observes:

'The process is magical. You have a dialogue with the plate—between your power and control and decisions as an artist and the chemical process itself. There is some freedom in this, some power, but not much. You play with time.'

A layered, dialogical temporality creates the island geography of the image, the map of minute "wells" and "lands" that hold the ink (see Morrish & MacCallum, 2013).

But there is something else as well, the punctum of the technology of photogravure itself, its "aura." In her discussion of the aura, Claire Humphries points out that Walter Benjamin's key contribution is 'to draw our attention to the moment of transition between two technologies' (2018, 157), in which the older, superseded technology becomes 'auratic in retrospect because it is irretrievable' (2018, 158). Humphries cites Laura Marks, for whom the 'aura is the sense an object can give that it can speak to us of the past without ever letting us completely decipher it' (2000, 81). In Dauphin Island, the old technology of photogravure doubles down on the auratic power of Dauphin Island as place, creating 'the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be' (Benjamin, 2007, 518).

That summer of 2013, we drove from Alabama to Mississippi, from Mississippi to Tennessee, searching for these places where Elvis Presley had passed. Often, when we got to the place we were looking for, or when someone tried to retrieve it from memory, it was gone, because a hurricane, or time, or death, had swept it away. What was left was the space between desire and its object, and this was what Lihie often photographed.

'We always looked for traces, and that looking also shaped the images we chose to include in the book', my mother said to me. 'There are no people in these images. There is always—not emptiness, but vastness and absence. The images represent what happened to us, what we looked for, and what we did not find, which ultimately is what interested us.'

This is what pierced us. There is the beach. There is nothing there. And yet time seems to be caught inside the photogravure, like a secret or a code, a subtle beyond.

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FOOTNOTE

[1] Sources consulted for this brief history of Dauphin Island include Carr et al (2006), Foreman (1932), Kennedy (1980), Rogers (1994), and Wright (2003).

IMAGE GALLERY

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