



Hot Books

Jessica Backhaus *What Still Remains*



Jessica Backhaus
What Still Remains
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My first thought when I open Jessica Backhaus's *What Still Remains* is home. Perhaps it's the memories a single crushed can of Arizona Green tea conjures (reminiscent of my childhood and strangely enough, the loss of a loved one). Regardless of the *why*, I feel an immediate personal connection with the images that fill the pages of Backhaus's book. This personal response of familiarity and nostalgia speaks to one of the artist's intentions: the desire for "people to feel something". Every image presents an individual evocative narrative, as seen in the picture of the discarded umbrella, the empty lawn chair overlooking the water's edge or the ripe peach sitting in a glass bowl by the window. Throughout *What Still Remains*, the overriding themes joined with the tangible quality of the images give the viewer a sense of physicality and of human presence, of notions of the used and discarded, and the domestic.

The idea of the physical and materialistic is made evident in

Backhaus's images through her aptitude as a "traditional" photographer, in the sense that she does not employ digital manipulation. Her use of natural light gives a textured depth to what she photographs. In *Careless*, a bright blue tennis ball has absorbed what it can from a rain puddle and sits drenched. A sheen of oil forms a pattern on the puddle's surface, which is disrupted by the reflection of a building façade and perhaps the shadow of the photographer herself. These found objects and chance encounters are essentially the artist's subject matter, carefully formed into the work, which in effect is "what still remains".

As Backhaus's compositions are found rather than staged, they are formulated using ordinary objects and fragments of incident with the facility to connect human beings. Clothes hangers, table cloths, the pages of a phone book, a shopping cart, a discarded plastic bottle – things most people associate with the rhythm of everyday life. In *Apple*, the viewer is



privity to the tiny bite marks out of a more than half-eaten green apple; freshly discarded the white flesh of the fruit only beginning to brown on its edges. The apple, like the blue tennis ball, rests in a muddy puddle. Tiny grains of dirt can be seen embedded in the pulp, making it less about our immediate reaction to the object as a piece of fruit and more about the image itself, through the artist's depiction of detail.

What Still Remains is rich with the traces of human presence. In *Longing for the Unknown*, a single lawn chair sits on a small dock, facing outwards towards the water. Its edges are rusted; the paint on its frame is beginning to peel off and it has been repaired with what looks like a rubber hose. The title suggests yearning, which adds, once more, an emotional layer to the image. The empty chair with its scratchy nylon surface has been used, perhaps as a spot to reflect on the day's events. The chair is a utility object that, for the most part, functions to provide rest. In this image, Backhaus shows a solitary chair and presents it to the viewer as a vestige of something that we, the viewer, can also return to.

The concept of returning to a familiar object in a domestic setting and presenting it as something which "remains" is another theme running through Backhaus's images. In *Dancing between the Lines*, the artist has photographed towels hanging on a bright yellow clothes line where multi-coloured pins are dotted around the photographic frame. Hanging in the foreground, the towel's pinks, reds and blues stand out against the pale green shrubbery in the background. The cropping of the image gives the viewer no indication of where the towels are drying, yet they evoke a sense of home and humanity. Someone has carefully hung the towels up to dry or perhaps used the towels to dry their soaking hair or to wipe the ocean's salty water off their skin.

In many ways, a sense of poignancy links the images in *What Still Remains*. Yet, surprisingly, Backhaus avoids



sentimentality. Her compositions create a narrative, thus connecting the viewer and forcing them to consider what it is that touches them about these everyday objects; perhaps it is the way they evoke memories, perhaps it is a resonating sense of melancholy, or even the notion of home. Regardless of what kind of response one has to Backhaus's work, the prevailing theme is what is left behind or simply forgotten, evidence that we were there.

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