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GALLERY



At the Colosseum (Looking Towards the Arch of Titus), Lambda print, 2002

Memory Pictures

By Jeffrey Cudlin

"Shimon Attie:
The History of Another"

At Numark Gallery to April 9

Shimon Attie clearly knows a thing or two about working within other people's guidelines. As a recipient of the 2001-2002 Rome Prize, Attie took an 11-month residency at the city's American Academy, where, as the prize's Web site explains, artists are asked to "examine firsthand the source of

Western humanistic heritage, and to engage in a dialogue with Rome's culture." So traditional an assignment—the original Prix de Rome, after all, was founded by Louis XIV back in 1666—might seem like a mismatch for many contemporary artists, particularly for Attie. His work crosses the boundaries of performance, photography, and sculpture, never quite belonging to any of the three. Although he's meticulous about his process, he seems to view art as a generalist, conceptualist activity—not

exactly sketching statuary at the Palazzo Barberini.

More important, the 40-something Los Angeleno has a very specific subject matter that at first blush hardly seems to lend itself to the landmark city of classical antiquity. A secular Jew, Attie is fascinated with displaced peoples and marginalized populations, and much of his work attempts to give form, as he says, to "the singular presence of the absent."

In his *Writing on the Wall* project from the early '90s, for example, Attie went

to a Berlin neighborhood once populated by poor Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. He found photos of these former residents and projected them onto the façades of the very buildings they once occupied. Photo documents of those projections show an eerie collision of a previously obscured past and an insistent present; they are, as one Judaic scholar has described Attie's work, "after-images of the Holocaust."

Attie's efforts to integrate this approach into the strictures of the Rome Prize—to converse with that city on his own terms—are documented in his current exhibition at Numark Gallery, "Shimon Attie: The History of Another." The show includes 14 poster-sized photographs from his Italian adventure, along with two additional prints from his Berlin series. At its best, this work dismantles our notions of the fixity of history and place by suggesting the narratives that lie hidden beneath the surface of everyday things.

Take the 72-inch-by-84-inch *Looking Onto Temple of Apollo* (2002): Three much-abused columns—one more or less intact, another missing its capital, a third lopped off near its base—loom in the lower-left-hand corner of the picture, emphatic in their chalky whiteness. To the right, a narrow archway is suffused in a supernaturally golden glow; unexpectedly, a piano covered with a bright-blue plastic tarp sits underneath the arch. In the middle of the picture, temporary metal barriers thread their way between the ruins, regulating foot traffic through the site. Clustered around this monument are structures that look like ordinary apartment buildings, but they tend to shrink away from the viewer, not possessing the same high-wattage splendor as the fragmentary temple. Attie's projected figure in this piece, a young boy, is on the outside looking in. He stands in the lower right; we see him from behind, rendered in a ghostly black-and-white. It's quite a contrast from the rest of the picture, but one that's

compositionally thrilling; the eye bounces along from one upheaval of light and color to the next.

It's tempting to think that Attie is having a bit of fun with Photoshop: Everywhere in his work, ancient monuments are bathed in a heavenly yellow that contrasts sharply with the impossibly rich blue of the sky or with the dim, misty shadows that enshroud surrounding buildings. But this palette indicates no postproduction sleight of hand. It turns out that in Rome, as in Washington, spotlights are used to direct visitors' attention to the city's monuments to "Western humanistic heritage." Attie attempted to capture the moments shortly after these lights turned on a dusk. "There was only a ten-minute window when I would have the right balance between different elements, the sun having gone down but the sky still glowing a lumi-

nous blue, while at the same time dark enough to show the projections," he tells us in the show's press release.

Now there's an old trope, and one not just of the West: Ghosts come out at night, bringing the past frighteningly into the present. Attie makes the most of this association: With his arms spread wide, the boy of *Temple of Apollo* leans forward against what could be a wall—or a sarcophagus. Against his grainy, high-contrast form, the nearby monument nearly hums with light, appearing to have been transplanted into his cool, shadowy city from a much brighter, warmer place and time. Similarly, in *At the Colosseum (Looking Towards the Arch of Titus)* (2002), a tired young Jewish woman is uncannily integrated into the scene, appearing to lean back against the Colosseum itself. She looks at the entrance to her right, peering uncertainly after the promise of activity just beyond a tall metal gate that glints as if gilt.

Both of these figures were taken from pictures of Jews living in Rome circa 1900—unassimilated immigrants, living on the periphery of the city and its history. The Colosseum, after all, was begun by Vespasian, the emperor responsible (along with his son, Titus) for the deaths of a half-million or so residents of Jerusalem around A.D. 70—a

conspicuous early holocaust—and was likely paid for in part, some historians suggest, with plunder from Judea. As Clement Greenberg once insisted, the history of gentiles is profane to the Jews. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, they've stood outside of it; gentile history, as Greenberg put it, "tends to no Jewish solution, remains meaningless vicissitude, without place or interest for the genuinely human." Attie underscores the otherness of his ciphers, yet he also suggests that they were caught between being resigned to exile and yearning to truly belong to the city in which they once lived—ghosts in life as well as in death.

Of course, as Attie presents it, the place they're yearning for hardly resembles the image of Rome promulgated by the American Academy. It looks instead like any messy urban center: Older buildings crumble; new developments founder; the occasional inglorious stump of some monument or other punctuates the whole. With only the barest manipulation on his part, Attie is constantly finding bizarre vistas of pasted-together masonry, fencing, and stage lighting. *At Portico of Octavia* (2002), for instance, presents a group of overlapping gold and blue columns seen through a distant, darkened archway. Undulating orange webs of plastic construction fencing rush from the middle distance into the foreground at the lower right, following the architecture and reminding the viewer of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Gates* and their industrial-strength saffron. Additional fencing, made of jagged wire, climbs above this barrier; together, they cast unearthly shadows across the ground.

We can almost believe that these aren't construction materials at all. They look like a deliberate artistic intervention, a pitting of present-day plastic against hallowed masonry to see what aesthetic sparks might fly. But Attie's only alteration of the site is modest: the image of a diminutive female figure projected against the pier of an arch. She wears a long skirt and folds her arms across her chest. The present moment is as inaccessible to her as this monument must be to any passing tourist, thanks to the redundant fences. Limits, barriers, and dislocations—Attie has found in them all a compelling metaphor for the story of the Jews and their troubled relation to any place they've

occupied in the Diaspora.

In this city constantly under construction, Attie is building monuments of his own. Unlike Rome's weathered protrusions of stone raked by artificial light, Attie's commemorations are made of light itself and are thus as ephemeral as the all too brief window in which he makes his photographs. These fleeting acts are so different in tone from the Roman ruins—quite "genuinely human," as Greenberg might have it. Consider *At Temple of Fortuna* (2002), in which an isolated fragment of ancient brickwork occupies the center of the picture. It's dramatically backlit and seems to rise out of the darkness. Attie projects onto this forbidding tomb a young boy who dangles his feet over its edge. He seems to examine an excavation to his right, apparently marveling at the forgotten places deep inside the earth. This boy is not an emblem of history as written by the victors; he is a sudden flash of counterpoint, a much needed sign of regret for the cost of empire.

Attie's act points to the post-modern idea that history is a discourse, not a simple narrative. Without discourse—without difference—there is only suppression and destruction. Attie's memorials, then, are a necessary correction, though the sheer aesthetic pleasure his vistas provide—their shimmering golds, deep blues, and carefully integrated figures—may seem troubling given their intent. Theodor Adorno famously asked whether art was even possible after the Holocaust, if one could wrestle with the fact of Auschwitz without trivializing or profaning it. Attie, apparently, feels compelled to create no matter what the risks. In doing so, he's revealed a chorus of difference underneath the surface and discovered something distinctive about Rome's relation to its residents, both permanent and transient. Unlike the traditional historical markers of Rome, Attie's art is shockingly impermanent, deeply personal, and ironically beautiful—much more like life itself. **CP**

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