

TIME LOST

John Pepper's photography represents an important testimony to individualism and to what Jean Paul Sartre meant when he said that "To exist is to be: to exist is to be open to encounter".

True to the traditions of the street photographer, Pepper takes finds his images in the "non-places" he visits journeying from one continent to another, from the United States to Europe. His unforgettable photos seize images of that openness—they trace the loneliness in which the characters he meets quite by chance are immersed. Importantly, he doesn't seek out the identity of the people he photographs; on the contrary, anonymity permits him to find fragments of himself in others.

So if his photographs are populated with people he knows nothing about--for that brief moment of their existence which fate steals from them in the click of a shutter they bring the uncanny power of non-personhood to the surface, allowing it to filter in and inhabit the photographer, and therefore us.

It is because of this effect and of these anonymous persons, that Pepper's photographs are timeless; it feels impossible to ascribe a precise temporal marker revealing when the shot was taken. These people, not affected by fashion or zeitgeist, are dressed or undressed simply according to the physical conditions of the environment in which they live--be it a shelter from the freezing cold (in the photographs taken on the Russian and Finnish coasts) or from the heat (on the beach at Barcelona).

As Swann, dunking his '*madeleine*' into his tea, is vividly and suddenly transported to his childhood on a Sunday morning before going to Mass, so Pepper relives his true lost time in his photographs.

Pepper works exclusively with natural light--both daylight and nightlight. The light of the sun sketching the boundary-line between earth and sky is also one of darkness embracing creation, and annulling any boundary. This is why his photography takes on a cosmic dimension that in the Evaporations series becomes apocalyptic. A threatening sky of dense grey cloud, from which rain falls to earth devastating it, like the hurricane that devastated the neighbourhoods of Brooklyn and Queens of which his visionary images give us a trace. Even the most solid certainties evaporate in this apocalyptic vision. We are left behind in a desolate landscape, with a frayed Stars and Stripes hanging limply at half mast, and a fenced and deserted Coney Island amusement park.

John Pepper uses analogue cameras and black and white film. He shoots with a Nikon F, using an external light metre and Tri-X, 400-asa film. He takes great pains to introduce light into the lens, widening it or

narrowing it until he has found the correct balance between the light and dark of the image. His sensitivity to light comes from his first adolescent experience in a dark room, and from his experience of painting, which he practiced while an art history student at Princeton University in the United States.

His loyal collaborator, Simona Bugionovi, who comes from a family of great Roman printers, tells of how John took her to a Caravaggio exhibition to explain how he saw and felt light. And indeed his work is a great example of that great truth—that photography is the design of light.

A traditional celluloid photograph is obtained during the photographic paper's transformation in the developing tank, the image slowly taking form. One can therefore feel how the analogue photograph follows its own cycle, going from its immaterial form to that of the more concrete printed image, catching that moment of life that, immediately following the click of the shutter, ceases to exist and simply fades away.

John Pepper is a polyhedral character in many ways, both multi-cultural and plurilingual. He finds his true self in the art of photography, his intimacy, as the medium helps him overcome the complex canvases of life—a medium which gives him access to great inspiration and peace, in which water is the unifying element.

What remain are unforgettable images of this vision : the aerodynamic figure of the boy frozen in mid-air as he jumps into the sea, spreading his arms as though they were wings, the image immortalized in a ray of light reflected in the water below; bodies half made up of the water that evaporates throughout Pepper's shot, leaving grey and black shadows that chase each other in a mysterious dance.

The sky and the water become ancestral spaces where everything generates itself only to vanish and restore itself according to the natural order of things.

One can only observe and, enchanted, grow whole in the face of these settings of immense beauty—as if one could enjoy for the briefest moment actual time compared to the infinite, a spectacle to which one has been invited to take part.

It seems right that having completed its journey of exhibitions across Europe, *Evaporations* ends its run in Rome, because Rome is Pepper's city of origin to which his work inevitably returns.

But also because Rome, being the Eternal City, is the place where the artist recaptures his lost time.

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