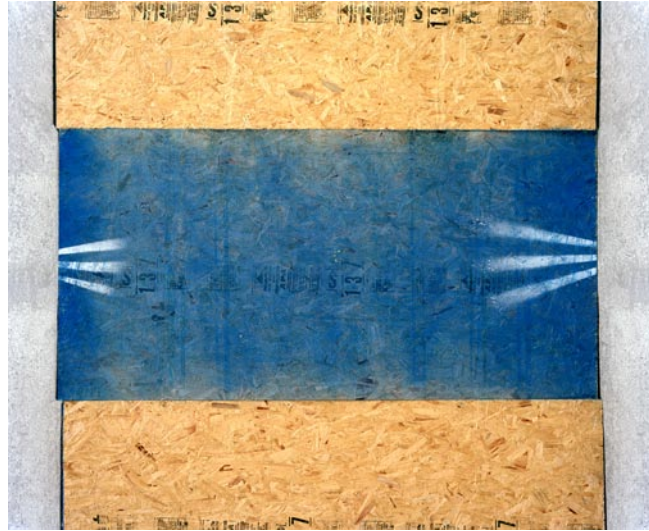


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'I Am I A Killer' at Sam Lee Gallery
By Kim Biel



The small twelve-piece exhibition, *I Am I A Killer*, which takes its title from a vintage Helen Levitt print that depicts the enigmatic phrase written in chalk on a boarded-up tenement window is doubtlessly one of this summer's more conceptually driven group shows. In his introduction, director Sam Lee implies that the statement, which can be read two ways—as either affirmation (“I am . . .”) or inquiry (“Am I?”)—is also reflective of the nature of the photographic act. Lee cites Roland Barthes's frequent equation of photography with death, the arrest of time through the making of an image.

To read the questioning aspect of the Levitt photograph, however, seems more indebted to Susan Sontag's work in *On Regarding the Pain of Others*. While Barthes was interested strictly in the role of the observer of the photograph, in her late work Sontag considered the role of the photographer at the moment of the photograph's creation. And, although both of these texts are chiefly concerned with the effect of the photograph on the human subject that it depicts, there are no such subjects featured in *I Am I A Killer*. Instead, the works on view are united with photography's death-drive mostly through the actions of the photographer on un-peopled landscapes, still lifes and camera-less abstractions. Many of these works suggest that the photographer can give life by the transformation of mundane materials. For example, the collaged chromogenic prints in Max Warsh's *Excreta 03* seem to simulate woodgrain with their scratched, ripped and over-painted surfaces. Their housing in a walnut frame begs comparison to the real thing. This work doesn't just test photography's presumed truth-value when it is employed as a representational tool; the mechanical aspect of photography is almost entirely withdrawn from this work and replaced, as in a painting, by the artist's hand.

Other standout works in the show also push insistently at the edge of such conceptual practices, though they are perhaps more concerned with testing the limits of the photography as a non-representational medium than as a documentary tool, as it was used by Levitt.

The slightly ombred dusty pink of Phil Chang's *Double (Exposure 1)* hints at a foggy coastal sunrise; one can even discern a brighter horizon of color like a miasma along the edge of the print. However, the image is actually constructed entirely without natural elements. Chang exposed expired film on a flatbed scanner and prints the results through a digital chromogenic process. Tiny curls of dust are evident in the final print, as is the fine grain of the film. This is the photographic process distilled to its most essential elements. Asking Levitt's question of this piece doesn't reveal Barthes's melancholic search for the living trapped in the arrested moment, but instead animates a material that was never alive. Chang's work is equally a picture of light (as is all photography) and a picture of the photographic material itself.

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Separate from *I Am / A Killer*, Inga Dorosz's captivating series of black and white pigment prints, titled *Seascapes*, are hung in the gallery's project space. Though these works are not included in the exhibition, they bear remarkable similarity of purpose and pose a unique answer to the Levitt inquiry. In these modestly scaled works, Dorosz adroitly shapes crumpled sheets of tinfoil into tempestuous seascapes. The soft focus of *Seascapes 1* and the dark vignetting at the corners of the print impart a rich historical quality to this image, as if it were Ahab's own nightmare of the roiling sea.

Dorozz's work resonates profoundly with the questions posed by *I Am / A Killer* and provokes a reevaluation of the role of the photographer as assassin. Works by Dorosz, Chang and Warsh all suggest that the photographer is perhaps more accurately conceived of as a midwife than as an agent of death.

---Kim Biel

I Am / A Killer closed in August at Sam Lee Gallery, Los Angeles. Other artists in the exhibition were: Sarah Conaway, Nancy de Holl, Alyssa Gorelick, Nicholas Grider, Ronni Kimm and Arthur Ou.

Kim Biel is a freelance writer based in Long Beach.