

frieze

Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili

Eighth Veil

Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili's seemingly accidental snapshots are infected with a colourful case of existential abstraction, a virus munching its way through memory. With a tautness between spooky presence and absence, she has played a very quiet, unsettling game. Each work is composed of several different images taken at different times: for example, in *Ere Is My Head* (2001/8/9), the rough removal of part of the image has left only a polygonic swathe of pale blue sky and the black field of what had otherwise been taken away. In another photograph, *Iveria/Taylor* (2001/6/9), a girl looks from the corner of her eye, her face overlaying a Soviet-era apartment block. The soft suspicion in her eyes – the face cut rudely from its source, shaped like shattered glass – gives a quietly discomfiting presence to the sunstroked building, overexposed so that whiteness at the bottom fades into an anemic cornflower blue near the top. A girl's body subtracted from *Test* (2009) and mixed with chemical abstractions finds itself halved and doubled on a black field *Turpa* (2001–9), fingerprints and darkroom accidents marking the whole operation.

Though the press release explicitly claims that Alexi-Meskhishvili draws her inspiration from the concept of 'flat Death' that Roland Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida* (1980), namedropping yesteryear's intellectual always leaves one feeling somehow skeptical – you can't help but wonder if this referential gambit has paid off. Seen without Barthes' filter, the images feel strange and dreamy, a haunted, brooding place, ever in the distance. They are like snapshots from a Soviet tourist's visit to Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical landscapes, with the homeland authorities slicing out all the subversive material, leaving something even more inexplicable (and perhaps mutely seditious) in its place.

Referring back to Barthes' 'flat Death' – the fugitive testimony of photography, the morbidity of capturing a subject that dies – these works seem to claim that we just shouldn't trust photographs. Thirty years after the publication of *Camera Lucida*, this seems a little elementary given our awareness now of the mendacity of images. Discarding these borrowed philosophical clothes, the spectral reverie in Alexi-Meskhishvili's work remains. In *Weathering Heights* (2008), a pink broadsheet riddled with geometric cut-outs hangs taped to a window streaked with dirt and dried rain, the city a blurry image behind it. Printed at the top of the sheet are the words 'Weathering Heights', a play on the title of Charlotte Brontë's 1847 gothic romance. Much of the page has been cut out in strange angular shapes; one can't be sure what exactly has been redacted – precisely what makes it so melancholic is elusive. The intimacy of the source images contrasted against Alexi-Meskhishvili's distancing manipulations make me feel nostalgic for places I've never travelled and fill me with the loss of a beautiful memory – the details of which are gone while the sense of their importance remains. The unplumbed sadness of the image endures, suffused with a curious spiritual malaise that is so eerily nuanced, it threatens to disappear.

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About this review

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