

**Ted Heibert**

# **Vulnerable Light**

So benumbed are we nowadays by electric lights that we have become utterly insensitive to the evils of excessive illumination.

– Jun'ichiro Tanizaki.<sup>1</sup>

There is a deep, dark secret to photography, one of which most people are unaware. Photography is a practice of deceit, betrayal, and, inevitably, violation. But this has nothing to do with the photographic subject, nor with the photographer him or herself. This, rather, is a characteristic of the very medium and, as we all have been told, *the medium is the message*: “the camera is sold as a predatory weapon.”<sup>2</sup>

If this is true, one must ask the necessary question: what is it that the camera preys upon? It is not the image, for the image is implicated in the act of appearance. At best one might argue that the *excerpting* of image from body or object constitutes the violation in this instance. Yet we have also been told that “it’s the object that wants to be photographed,”<sup>3</sup> and that “everything today exists to end in a photograph.”<sup>4</sup> Here one might accuse the object world of vanity, but this does not translate to an accusation against the medium itself. No, the betrayal of photography concerns something different, something neglected, something even – perhaps – unexpected. Photography, quite simply, is a practice of *betraying darkness* or it is nothing at all.

Consider that photography was not born out of the light at all, but out of the literal shadows – the camera obscura. The distinct ability of darkness to preserve an altered version of minute amounts of light that penetrate its domain. As we know, light tends to obliterate darkness, turning it into shadow (at best) or overexposed and flattened surfaces of opaquely whitewashed tonality. Darkness is more generous, allowing for the preservation of light itself, in all its distinctiveness – on the condition that it is content to merely appear and not to conquer. Yet, darkness is also more clever, for it has a tolerance threshold after which it disappears, goes into hiding, unable to brave the intolerant and imperialist interventions which destroy the intimacy it protects.

It is easy, in this spirit, to understand why ultimately photography is not in any way an optical discipline. Instead, photography is always about sensory deprivation – chasing back the light in order to allow for the possibilities that can only grow out of darkness itself. And that light is *used* in these instances is no argument against the prominence of darkness, for here it is merely the relationship between the two that assumes an entirely counter-intuitional form. It is not the light that masks out the darkness, but rather light that in a very literal – all too literal – sense, *eats itself alive*: “at the heart of the photographic image there’s a figure of nothingness, of absence, of unreality.”<sup>15</sup>



*Blindsight*, Isabelle Hayeur, 2005

Consider that the works of Isabelle Hayeur are, perhaps, not quite what they seem. Not, in other words, the faithful documentary companion that photography is so often made out to be. Instead, and on a merely formal level, these are literally recombinant images – spliced landscapes, not merely recombined or collaged but *genetically engineered*. Yes, one must be firm in assertions such as this, light indeed can be genetically engineered – and Hayeur’s images are proof. But what did you expect? Did you think that any recombinant phenomenon would stand up and declare itself as enhanced? No, the case is much more subtle, and in its subtlety much more sinister. The clone looks *just like you* – if it didn’t it would not be a clone. It is, of course, faster, better, stronger – as are Hayeur’s images – but it would never admit to it for it is also *smarter*, and it knows that it must at all costs remain convincing as a humble, flawed and personable image.

The vulnerability is a hoax.

Or perhaps not? Maybe, just maybe, these are images that seek to fit in, images that request rather than demand our trust, images that know they are hoaxes and ask us to engage nevertheless? Even fantasies want to be photographed, and yes, even fantasies – or perhaps *especially* fantasies – are vulnerable.

Here a subtly placed plastic bag, there the archeological lines of urban history. It takes a year for a tree to form a new ring on its inside, but for an image this always instead occurs at the speed of light itself. Or at the speed of darkness. But they have something in common, in the end, for in both instances it is a ruptured body – a body whose very condition of appearing is that a violence has been done to it. One must *cut into* the tree to see its lines; one must equally *penetrate* the landscape in order to see its innards. Consequently, a hypothesis: are Hayeur’s images not perhaps best describe as Frankenstein landscapes? Not simply because of their digital recompositing, but first and foremost because they are *stolen body parts* of the landscape itself.

One could, of course, put this more eloquently by referring to the age-old archetypes of beauty, the fetishized images of Zeuxis whose paintings *borrowed* from only the most beautiful women around him, and even then only in parts.

The most beautiful nose + the most beautiful eyes + the most beautiful chin = the most beautiful face. But this too is a horror story, no less sinister for its justification as sublime. But perhaps this is the fate of beauty in an age of cosmetic surgery and biotechnology – destroyed by becoming precisely *literal*. No more the glowing vitality of *living beauty* but now instead only at best a beauty that is resurrected, always at least partially decomposed, always spliced and recombined and streamlined and updated and, most importantly, *reanimated* as if its appearance were entirely natural. We know better. There is no more beauty in purity, no more romance of unity or of uncharted territory – in fact there is no more beauty that is not precisely a disavowal of the unity, the romance and the uncharted territories that have been its historical prison.

The analogy seems to hold equally well when it is the beauty of the landscape under consideration. And this is perhaps why Hayeur's *Excavations* can be both so powerful, so mysterious and, ultimately, so terrifying. We always assumed that we were afraid of the dark, for it is in the darkness that the demons of our imaginations live. But perhaps, it has always been just the other way around? Perhaps in fact it has always been darkness that is the *excuse* for our fear when the real object of terror has been the imagination itself? The last thing that anyone wants is to see their nightmares in the light of day; much better to confine to the shadows that which we do not understand, for once set free it is the light itself that is made vulnerable. Indeed, for the most part, it would seem that the imaginary has been relegated to the dark side of living which is why there is something imminent, something disconcerting about *seeing* these recombinant forms, something that makes the light itself seem foreign and out of place.

And this is perhaps the overarching consequence of the emergence of digital media – an imaginative facilitator that is no less disjunctive for the convincing realities it offers to the eye. A matter of perspective, one might say, and yet the mystique of the digital is that it is able to precisely make apparent *perspectives that do not exist*. The recombinant image requires a recombinant gaze, implicating the viewer in the intensity of impossible appearance, and recombining our very visual sensorium in the process. Compare, for instance the angle of viewing across the several images that comprise Hayeur's *Excavations*, in which one is either floating *above* the landscape or else literally *buried* beneath the feint suggestions

of civilized light. This juxtaposition is important for it recombines not only the images themselves but we, as viewers too.



*Succession*. Isabelle Hayeur, 2005

Consider the (formally) twinned images, *Blindsight* and *Aube*, whose perspective places both camera and – consequently – viewer *beneath* the ground-level of civilized living. In this instance we are literally buried along with the image – buried alive, one might say – zombies waiting patiently for the unfortunate passer-by, or creatures of the night silently stalking the day itself. Is this not perhaps something like what the world would look like to the monsters under our beds, or to the newly awakened zombie or any of a host of other *imaginary* creatures? It is not by mistake that we, as a culture, *bury* our fears – whether those be spiritual fears of death, traumatically repressed fears of living, or any other manifestation that even existing in the darkness of conscience is nevertheless *too bright, too present, too imminent* to the daily enactments we carry on in willful disregard. Here as viewers we are, ourselves, literally emerging from *underneath* the light, stalking

the familiarity of the civilized world, hiding, waiting. We might be enticed by the archeological constructions – the seven layers of Hell perhaps – but it is we who have been placed *within* the darkness in these images.

Consider, then, on the other hand, a perspective of the opposite sort, the floating disembodied gaze of *Succession* and *Traces* which present the landscape from a perspective that is fully *ungrounded*. Here we are exactly airborne, ghostly presences hovering over a landscape that itself is strangely unfamiliar, unsynchronized and out-of-place. It is not that these landscapes are over-exposed, but that they seem to not belong to the illuminated world at all. It is telling, for instance, that the reflections do not quite match the contours of the landscape, that dirt sits awkwardly atop the striated layers of clay and stone, that in both cases the landscape itself seems strangely *abandoned*, despite the traces and suggestions of human presence. There is, in other words, a poignant sense of dislocation here that might suggest that which we already knew – these are not images of locations at all, but images of *dislocations* which refuse to succumb to the sublime of a “good little landscape,” which refuse to be represented and objectified and instead proclaim in no uncertain terms that they will be here long after we ourselves have gone. Not unlike the shifting landscapes of dreams themselves, Hayeur’s images refuse to stay in focus, refuse to be inhabited and instead precisely *inhabit us* – haunted landscapes, or better, *predatory* landscapes, and in their contemplation we become part of their predatory ecosystem – the imagination brought to light in such a way that it is not the imaginary that disappears but the reality of illuminated existence itself.

And, might one not say something similar for the works of Jennifer Long? Here it is not the recombinant spirit that is in play but something perhaps even stranger: an intimacy that might only be called *alienating*, and not because it is directed elsewhere. No, it is because it is *represented* that the intimacy particular to Long’s works can be so disconcerting, an intimacy of the sort normally only encountered behind closed doors, or in the imagination itself. These images, in other words, seem precisely *familiar* and yet their familiarity has *no image referent*. Instead, the referent is precisely imaginary – this is their paradox and their brilliance – a photographic moment of exactly that which can *never be photographed*, rarely even visually remembered for in intimate circumstance it is not sight but emotion that

reigns. These are not, consequently, *images* at all – not in any real sense. Instead, they are precisely *fantasies* – photographs of what those intimate moments which we can only feel *would look like if represented*.

The vulnerability is a hoax.



*Hairworks: Liz. Jennifer Long, 2005*



Or perhaps not? Maybe, just maybe, these are images that can be so poignant because they precisely give us what we do not expect? Even fantasies want to be photographed, and yes, even fantasies – or perhaps *especially* fantasies – are vulnerable.

The beauty and the transgression of Long's images are that, in fact, they are *not made to be looked at*, and even less *to be shared*. They are, instead, made to be felt – that which is a photographic impossibility is represented here as the catalyst of seduction at its most poignant. If one might say that there is a *corporeal* effect associated with the dischord of Hayeur's landscapes, it is precisely a displaced *tactility* that occupies the darkened imaginary of Jennifer Long's imagery. A fragile strand of hair, or two or three... one would never know unless the lights were on. And yet, one cannot help but look at these images and wish that they were not... that the lights were off and the intimacy preserved from the arrogance of illumination itself. Not the soft touch of sensitized bodies, but exactly the opposite – here the intimacy can be so disconcerting because it is both evocatively immanent and coldly denied, denying us the satisfaction of simply perceiving the figures as we would expect to – as images. Instead, in a strange twist, these images resist the objectifying gaze so typical of figurative photography, reversing its directionality in such a way that it is not the represented figure rendered in vulnerable self-consciousness but we ourselves. These are images, in other words, that *objectify us*. Resisting their very descent into imagery, here these figures remain bodies; it is we who watch who have, in this instance, become precisely images.

But this perhaps is nothing new, in fact perhaps the natural fate of an image culture that has subsumed our everyday realities to begin with. For, isn't the intrigue of televised romance, suspense and mellow-drama actually a tool for refashioning our own vicarious engagements with the world around us? And isn't the charm of a good story precisely that it leaves us feeling that *we have been a part of something*, some event or adventure – represented somehow as sharing affinities with one character or another? And might one not push the analogy even further and suggest that whether fictive affinity or bodily contact, the result is different only in degrees? In both instances we are seduced without realizing it, caught in a moment that defies representation and consequently represented

ourselves through precisely the self-consciousness that comes from contextual immersion. Consequently, a hypothesis: are Long's images not perhaps Medusae of sorts, sirens which seduce and compel only to end up themselves with the last laugh, trapping us in their cold intimacy which nevertheless provides a melodious and soothing descent into the latent darkness they seek to share? For darkness, as we know, cannot be seen – yet it can, nevertheless, be felt. And there is a *tactility* to Long's images that speaks without speaking, though its doubled message is no less clear for the voiceless words.

Consider, for instance, the *Hairworks* series whose exposed, vaguely voyeuristic poses are tempered and amplified by a clearly anonymous framing. One can hardly call these images beautiful, and yet there is a disturbingly erotic touch to the wet hair, the upraised chins, the exposed torsos. These images are, in fact, *confrontationally* intimate and the effect is both poignant and seductive. Fundamentally paradoxical, these bodies might be erotic or humiliated, enticing or confrontational, confident or victimized – and there are no real clues as to which is more plausible. There is something obsessive about these images, something taboo – something that *cannot be ignored*. If these are images of intimacy, why the anonymity? If these are images of personalized bodies, why the newly washed and still-wet and entangled hair? If these are images of seduction, why the full-frontal pose? And why the series, the intentional homogenization of difference, the taxonomy of torsos – unless the camera is indeed in this case a *serial predator*? Why, in other words, are these images so fully disconcerting? Might it not be because it is not the camera which takes the role of predator here, but we ourselves? There is, one must insist, something ominous about these images, something that is unmistakably violent, but whose story resists engagement. These are not traumatic bodies, for trauma is always personal in nature and great lengths have been taken to ensure that each of these bodies is faceless, named only by title. These anonymous stories nevertheless implicate us, *demanding* that we acknowledge our own viewing perspective even though we never really understood the context. These images are unreadable, yet they are alive. And, it is we who read who are implicated by consequence.

If the *Hairworks* can be so disturbing because of the *living* unreadability, it is precisely the opposite case that is in play with Long's other series: *Wallflowers*.



*Wallflowers: Bridget.* Jennifer Long, 2005

Here again the framing is of the utmost importance – *surgical* in its application, *amputating* in its rendering of the bodies themselves, but again strangely intimate, gentle and flowing in its composition. There is, however, nothing *animated* about these bodies, no suggestion of movement or gesture but merely the frozen moment of photographic certainty – a moment which here is disconcerting precisely because one cannot tell if it is in any way intentional. Strangely, while most excerpted bodies will suggest their off-frame continuation, this series of images precisely and explicitly *does not*. Not, in other words, windows into a moment of voyeuristic engagement but rather calculated representations whose very presentation would seem to *hyper-objectify* the bodies in question – voodoo fetish dolls of one sort or another, and it is only natural that such connotations should be disconcerting. These bodies are also mannequins, and the staticity of the poses themselves is amplified by the precision of both focus and framing. For

all their intimate connotations, for all their evocative beauty, there is something – in other words – very *dead* about these bodies. Certainly not *Wallflowers* in that high-school sense of waiting to dance, these bodies are explicitly *lying down*, floor-flowers perhaps, but perhaps more aptly pushing up emotional daisies. It would of course only clarify the images if there were a trickle of blood, a bruise or a blemish on these figures, but – what is perhaps even stranger – *it would not seem out of place*. That these markers are absent only intensifies the uncertainty of the images themselves – images which by all accounts were never meant to see the light.

Again, in other words, it is precisely the emergent imagination that makes these images vulnerable. That we cannot tell if they are nightmares or fantasies is part of the vulnerability. If not traumatized bodies then most certainly traumatized *images* – images that exceed the constraints of the subject, refusing to be preyed upon by the camera and instead turning to stone those who attempt to categorize their stories. Not vulnerable bodies, but *vulnerable light* – illumination is never more vulnerable than when subjected to the over-exposure of imaginative proliferation, and stories that do not tell themselves leave the light of their appearance vulnerable to the darkness of the imagination. What is intimate in darkness is, inevitably, vulnerable in light. We are no longer afraid that the photograph will steal our soul – we are rather afraid that it will reveal the fact that we have none. Or perhaps, in a strange twist of fate, it is the photograph itself that, by assuming the explicit *soulfulness* of the imaginary, fulfills its destiny as the liberator of darkness, the catalyst for possibilities both intimate and terrifying.

Photography has never been about light. Instead, it has always been exactly the darkness of the imaginary that haunts the photographic image – an image that immediately leaves its object behind, substituting an imaginary double for that moment or event, body or experience.

But what happens when we look to the *darkness* of photographic practice? Here we find the true romance of the image, not in the competitive illustrations of documentary accuracy, nor in the political power of mobilized message, but just the opposite. If a picture can be worth a thousand words, can it also be worth a thousand moments of silence? If photography can be about capturing the light,

can it not also be about the liberation of darkness? For, as we know, it is in darkness that the imagination grows, taking on epic proportions that can be both compelling and terrifying, since its real-world referent no longer rises to the stage to keep it in disciplinary check.

Behind every image then, one might posit an imaginary world, illuminated by precisely the dynamic of photographically liberated darkness. And, it is in this world of the darkened imaginary that light itself is made, for perhaps the first time, vulnerable.

## Notes

1 Jun'ichiro Tanizaki. *In Praise of Shadows*. Stony Creek (CT): Leete's Island Books, 1977. p. 36.

2 Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. London: Doubleday, 1989. p. 14.

3 Jean Baudrillard. "Objects, Images, and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Illusion." In *Art and Artifact*. Nicholas Zurbrugg, ed. London: Sage, 1997. p. 14.

4 Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. London: Doubleday, 1989. p. 24.

5 Jean Baudrillard. *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit*. Chris Turner, trans. London: Verso, 1998. p. 93.

## Biographies

**Isabelle Hayeur** (Montreal) completed a BFA in 1996 and a MFA in 2002 at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Her large-format digital montages have been exhibited across Canada and in Europe, United-States, Latin America and Japan.

**Jennifer Long** (Toronto) is originally from Vancouver Island. She studied at Ryerson University receiving her BAA in Photographic Arts (Honours) in 1998. Her photo-based work has been exhibited nationally and internationally.

**Michael Turner** (Vancouver) is the author of *Company Town*, *Hard Core Logo*, *Kingsway*, *American Whiskey Bar*, and *The Pornographer's Poem*. His work has been adapted to radio, stage, television and feature-film, and translated in French, Russian, and Korean.

**Tamsin Clark** is a Victoria-based photographic artist and a lecturer in the Visual Arts Department of the University of Victoria.

**Ted Hiebert** is a Canadian visual artist and theorist and the editorial assistant for *Ctheory* at the University of Victoria.