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Art-focused Journalism by Tyler Green

Tyler Green Modern Art Notes

July 21, 2011, 8:51 am

Carmageddon and the presence of absence

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Last weekend, Los Angeles basked in the closure of Interstate 405, the primary and perpetually traffic-choked north-south artery through the west side of the metropolis. For weeks before the closure, civic officials begged Angelenos to stay away from the 405 and the streets around it. So desperate were civic officials to avoid an epic traffic jam that the LAPD [asked Lady Gaga, Ashton Kutcher and Kim Kardashian](#) to tweet about what locals quickly tabbed “Carnageddon.”

Then the weekend closure happened. As it turned out, there were no traffic jams. Instead, the natives took the opportunity to enjoy a [mellow weekend of with I-405 appreciation](#), complete with choreographed human signage, a dinner party and bands. [Image: The 405 via [Flickr user Chris Bucka](#).]

Until a few days ago I thought I was incapable of imagining the 405 without cars. When you drive the 405 you aren’t just surrounded by acres of Japanese steel, but you can often see several miles of cars ahead of you. To imagine the 405 without automobiles required, well, Photoshop.



But then on Sunday night as I experienced Carnageddon vicariously [through Flickr](#), tweeted photos and via the photojournalists of the Los Angeles Times, I was bombarded with images of the previously unimaginable. Call it the suddenly ubiquitous presence of absence.

The photographs were creepy, unlikely, bizarre and, well, predictably unpredictable: I knew there would be pictures of the 405 without cars. I should have known what that would look like, but I couldn’t quite wrap my head around it.

In hindsight, I realize that this is not the first time pictures of the eerie presence of absence that have fascinated me in recent years. The best example is Detroit ruin porn: Pictures of an emptied out urban core that count on our shock and awe at what isn’t there — windows, building interiors and a once-thriving civilization. What’s fascinating about those pictures isn’t the decay, but what’s missing. Our eyes fill in glass, people, furniture, roofs, whatever the pictures need to imagine what that place must have been like, [how that grand train station was once grand](#).



As I scrolled through this [slide show of 91 Carnageddon pictures](#) by Los Angeles Times photographers, I realized that a few years ago LA-based artist [Amir Zaki](#) had actually prepared me for the presence of absence. In 2004 Zaki made a series of work called “[Spring to Winter](#),” a group of pictures that were exhibited at the [MAK Center in 2005](#). It is made up of photographs that have been digitally altered into dissonance. It’s mostly obvious what is wrong with each image... but the wrongness is so profoundly uncomfortable and, well, fascinating that we can’t look away. [How is that house not falling down the hill? Isn’t there supposed to be a fireplace there?](#) [Image: Amir Zaki, *Untitled (FPBL01)*, 2004.]

Zaki’s work questions the notion of photographic authenticity, whether what we’re seeing can possibly be real. Look, I know that the houses in Zaki’s *Untitled (OH_04X)* (2004, above) have to fall down the hill. *Have to*. But I also know that there *have* to be cars on the 405, right? Maybe Carnageddon was just a giant civic art project, a way of demonstrating the power of alternate realities, the value of questioning what we accept as real or essential. Maybe LA just made a Zaki.

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