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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"
SEPTEMBER 2022

Anonymous Architectures at MANA Contemporary (New Jersey)



Lauren Silberman, Nowadays Dancefloor, 2020 (Nowadays). Archival Pigment Print, 78" x 60".

Anonymous Architectures

Presented by The Monira Foundation

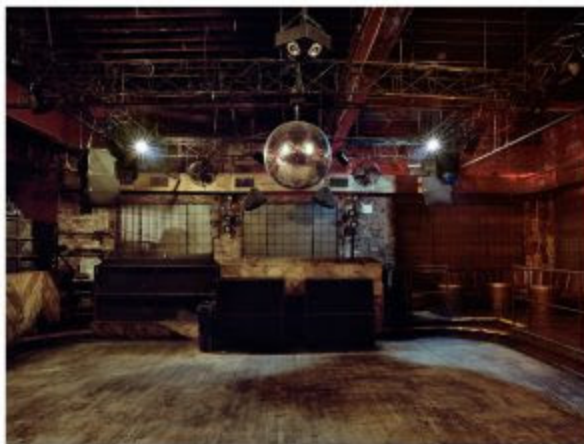
(<https://monirafoundation.org/>)MANA Contemporary

(<https://www.manacontemporary.com/>)May 12 through August 31, 2022

By **GARY RYAN**, August 2022

The *Anonymous Architectures* photography exhibit at the Monira Foundation at MANA Contemporary in Jersey City, a short walk from Journal Square, is a deeply satisfying show well-worth the trip across the Hudson River. Featuring photographs captured during lockdown by Brooklyn-based photographers Lauren Silberman and Alexa Hoyer, the show is a weighty reminder of what we all have recently been through together. Their two photographic projects, *The Lost Happy Hours* by Silberman and *Window Dressing* by Hoyer were made in New York City during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 when, in the wake of the closures of all non-essential businesses, the city that never sleeps became a veritable ghost town.

The Lost Happy Hours series by Silberman are rather large photographs (78 x 60 in.) of her favorite nighttime haunts — music venues and nightclubs familiar to Brooklyn’s creative culture. Per design the photographs have edge-to edge sharpness, and an inviting sense about them so the observer feels free to step into and out of them at will.



Lauren Silberman, GoodRoom, Dancefloor, 2020 (Good Room). Archival Pigment Print, 60" x 75".

In 2020 when the photographs were taken, entire hospitals across the city had been

converted into huge, overflowing Covid wards, and the entire city, as were most cities around the world, were shut down. Camera in-hand, Silberman approached the venue owners of the once lively establishments where her community had thrived because she missed them. Once inside, she saw what we see in her photographs — emptiness, silence, some having been repurposed for other mundane purposes, some in dire danger of shuttering forever because of lost business and revenue.

Dancefloor, 2020 (Elsewhere) looks ready for a dj to set up a turntable coffin and start the dance-ball spinning, and *Stage, 2020 (Pete's)* looks like the musicians just need to set up their mics and do a sound check, when in fact both spaces had been closed for months. Both of these are digital captures.

The other photographs were made with medium format film. *Stage, 2020 (Union Pool)*, like Pete's also only needs the band to start playing, since their instruments are on the stage seemingly ready to go. *Dancefloor, 2020 (GoodRoom)*, like Elsewhere is missing only a dj and dancers, and *Dancefloor, 2020 (Nowadays)* has totally been transformed into a large greenhouse full of houseplants of all shape and sizes (as though they were stand-ins for absent patrons) soaking up radiant light, making the most of a less-than-ideal situation. There is a definite story here that the observer can relate to.



Alexa Hoyer, *Window Dressing* – 40.7655528,-73.9697959, 2020. Archival Pigment Print, 16" x 20".

Hoyer's Window Dressing photographs were taken during the George Floyd — *BlackLivesMatter* protests, when the pandemic was still raging, but also when demonstrations were occurring on a daily basis throughout the city, especially in downtown and midtown Manhattan, and more broadly, across the country.

For the three weeks while the protests were happening, Hoyer took her camera into the streets. Trained as a sculptor, she saw the freshly boarded up downtown and midtown buildings (as protection from the perceived coming storm) as found, unintentional ready-mades, especially before graffiti artists eventually tagged them, and before demonstrators wrote *BLM* messages across the plywood *blank slates*. Each morning she would walk up the shadowy side of a chosen street when the storefronts were shielded from the bright sun to insure better color saturation, then later when the sun shifted, she walked on the other side, working quickly before the freshly boarded up buildings were finally marked heavily with messaging, not stopping to take notes, but letting her camera geo-tag each frame. The geo-tags are part of each photograph's title.



Alexa Hoyer, Window Dressing – 40.759201,-73.976082, 2020. Archival Pigment Print, 16" x 20".

Hoyer's photographs are captures of a society's discontents, unease, and primal fears at that very specific time in our shared experience, but with a backdrop of capitalism as an idea, the ever-present, ever-grinding gears of commerce reflected in the matter-of-fact storefronts (this is Manhattan after all), and with a veneer of

ruined hoping for the best (also a Manhattan trait). These businesses were not boarded up for a hurricane, or forever, but only for temporal protection to weather a tumultuous crowd who would eventually be asked back to buy in these stores again.

If a painter paints self-portraits over and over as has often been argued, Hoyer's photographs are in a way pictures of us, or at least certainly of the stuff our lives are made of, even if here in a radically altered state, ranging from the mundane to the sublime — boarded up drugstores, boarded up banks, a boarded up Hermes store. In short, Hoyer did well to capture a society acting out of its deep ambivalence and pent up frustrations over societal woes in America? Her photographs are 16 x 20 in., but presented as they are *en masse*, unframed, and in tiled, group format, their effect is sweeping.

The curation for this show is also notable — Ysabel Pinyol Blasi, Monira Foundation executive director and curator, brought this show together, and imagined that the images of both photographers in this effort worked better in dialogue than either would have as stand-alone narratives. The way that both independent bodies of work augment each other is remarkable.

Almost as a whimsy, at the main entrance to MANA the curator has installed a collection of cloud photos that Hoyer took of hand-painted clouds in various dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History. They fit the space well, and act as an appropriate entrée to the MANA Contemporary space generally, and point the way to the *Anonymous Architectures* show in the Monira Foundation gallery on the top floor.

Also of note is that elsewhere at MANA Contemporary there are impressive longstanding exhibitions of Andy Warhol silkscreens, and of John Chamberlain wrecked car assemblages — Silberman's and Hoyer's photographs hold their own in juxtaposition admirably. If anything, their work is more timely, and in that respect, arguably more relevant for us now. **WM**

MENU



GARY RYAN

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