



**Panizza Allmark**

Transformations, No. 5 (November 2002)

<http://www.cqu.edu.au/transformations>

ISSN 1444-377

---

**Abstract:** Unlike the traditional notion of the sublime, which is a masculine aesthetic, my photographic work explores the uncanny, a feminist counter aesthetic, and the urban environment. I describe my work as a *photographie feminine*, writing the traces of the feminine body. Importantly I address the contradictions and dichotomies of the *feminine* that exist within the periphery of the city.

**Key terms:** uncanny, photography, sexuality, feminine, night.

---

The city is a place of paradox. The city offers multiple contrasts and possibilities for the street wanderer. It offers a sensual experience. The city is, as Elizabeth Wilson (1991, p. 7), declares both " 'masculine' in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas and arid industrial regions" which can be interpreted as the urban sublime and it is " 'feminine', in its enclosing embrace, in its indeterminacy and labyrinthine uncentredness" which can be associated with the uncanny.

My work draws on the analysis of Cixous (1976) and Giblett (1996) on the uncanny. As suggested by Cixous and Giblett, the indeterminacy and intensity of the uncanny as a counter-aesthetic has the potential to disrupt the phallogocentric order associated with the aesthetic responses to the sublime and the subsequent relationship which establishes the subject and object divide and the masculine 'achievements' of repression and sublimation. My encounters with the city as woman and journey photographer attempt to traverse divisions. My journey is bound up with the feminist project of understanding identity and positionality. My *photographie féminine*, the writing of the traces of the feminine body, provides a space to explore the uncanny; it involves the 'painted women'. In the literal sense the photographic work concerns images of female sexuality displayed in the urban environment. Importantly I address the contradictions and dichotomies of the *feminine* that exist within the periphery of the city. I suggest that my postmodernist or feminist landscape photography, incorporating notions of the uncanny as a counter-aesthetic is less a means of defining a place through tight visual control and mastery over the landscape. It is a way of negotiating and representing a landscape in terms of a space that is open to possibilities.

The uncanny is the feminist counter-aesthetic that is evoked in my photographs of the city. Freud (1958), who developed a detailed account of the uncanny, suggests that the uncanny can be associated with an overpowering female sexual 'force'. The uncanny is the 'unhomely'. It is a 'return to the womb' which in the patriarchal

consciousness has been associated with dread and horror and is considered negatively. Indeed as Giblett (1996, p. 33) points out, it could be described as the odour of female genitalia "which for Freud were the ultimate unheimlich, the (un)homely or uncanny".

In Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" (1958) he associates sexual disquiet with the city. Although he was not a *flâneur*, he recalls his own ominous experience of his repeated fortuitous encounters in a built environment. He claims that there were "nothing but painted women to be seen ... a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to abandon my exploratory walk..." (Freud, 1958, p. 143-144).

As many male writers have suggested, the association with the feminine and sexuality is a source of ominous ambiguity and 'disorder' in the city. For many male writers of the city from diverse fields of investigation, such as Franz Kafka and Lewis Mumford, to photographers, such as William Klein and Garry Winnogrand, the multiple contrasts, chaos and 'disorder' of urban life are depicted as threatening. Yet, rather than retreating from this perceived aspect, my work confronts the 'dread' and 'horror' of the 'disorder', by representing it ironically. Moreover, my pleasure in the journey through various cities illustrates Wilson's assertion (1991, p. 57) that women have often been less daunted by city life than men. Furthermore, although the city can be a place of danger for women, it can also offer a freedom from patriarchal restraints, and I might add, from adhering to masculine aesthetics. Wilson (1991, p. 8) suggests that perhaps:

the 'disorder in the city does not so much disturb women...The socialisation of women renders them less dependent on duality and opposition: instead of setting nature against the city, they find nature *in* the city. For them, that invisible city, the 'second city', the underworld or secret labyrinth, instead of being sinister or diseased... is an Aladdin's cave of riches.

Wilson's statement is particularly relevant to my work which presents a melange of images of the ambiguous and disorienting aspects of urban display that evoke the uncanny. Moreover, there is a depiction of the blending or blurring of society's borders. There is dynamism in the depiction of the co-existence of what is traditionally considered diametrically opposed, such as a pornography stand outside a church.



Las Vegas

14<sup>th</sup> June 1999

The uncanny evoked in the photographs is characterised by a strangeness that elides resolution and which shifts between the traditionally fixed boundaries of what is considered to be 'real' and what is thought to be 'imaginary'. For example, the distinct boundaries between the private and the public and sex and religion are disrupted in my documentation of the divinity of the feminine. As such, the uncanny counter-aesthetic offers an alternative paradigm of thought compared to masculine neo-classicist aesthetics and its fidelity to distinct binaries.

Feminist philosopher, Grosz (1995, p. 108) suggests that the city is the site for the body's cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media and the arts. She states that "it is the place where the gendered body is representationally re-explored, transformed, contested, re-inscribed". A number of my photographs have involved the re-framing of displayed images of female bodies in the streets. In particular, there is an identificatory process at work in the interplay between my female gaze and the images of femininity. The exploration of depictions of femininity also represents "a consciousness that historically women have been 'framed' through the process of representation and can be reframed through the same process" (, 1995, p.1). In other words, through re-representation there is the possibility to subvert the patriarchal positioning of women.

The range of photographs corresponds to the theme of *photographie féminine* in two ways. Firstly, it relates to my overt attention to, or more precisely an awareness of, the feminised body in which I try to disrupt the masculine structure of representation by attempting to introduce new formulations or discourses. Secondly, it relates to the representation of a vernacular landscape from a feminist perspective. The photographs produced form part of an autobiography. It is the documentation of personal observations at particular times and locations. Battersby (1989) and Lippard (1995) contend that woman photographers and writers generally tend to approach the environment from an intimate viewpoint. As such, we are concerned with what we are familiar with, rather than an Otherness or separateness.

Despite the differences in the geographical and assumed cultural differences of the various cities to which I travelled, I found similar themes of socially constructed femininity which are familiar to me and reflect my own media-orientated cultural background. Furthermore, in the placing of a picture within a photograph, or a scene within a scene, the work not only draws attention to discourses of femininity, as our visual society is dominated with images of young women, but also to the fact that our post-modern sense of reality is mediated visually.

My work acknowledges Cixous' assertion that in *écriture féminine*:

Woman will return to the body which has been confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. (Cixous, 1975, p. 880)

Indeed, the representational body functions for the female spectator as a cultural reminder of her fetishisation. The uncanny reworks the traces of the past and "returns the subject momentarily to the unconscious and to the surfaces of the body which have been inscribed, and some of whose depths have been invested by capitalism" (Giblett, 1996, p. 34). Therefore, in a subjective postmodern documentary sense the work provides 'evidence' of my encounters with the female body on display. It is also an attempt to subvert a dominant patriarchal reading of images of females through the use of mimicry and ironic juxtapositions. Rather than

the voyeurism evoked in the *flâneur*, my encounters with commercial images of females confirms Doane's (1987) argument that when women are spoken to 'as women' in advertising, the physical separation between subject and object, conducive to both *flânerie* and voyeurism, is annihilated. In particular, as Fuss (1992, p.729) points out, for the female viewer the commodified image of woman "is the place of both a constitution and a fading of subjectivity: both are 'screens' that operate for the subject as sites where identity emerges *and* recedes." The site where identity emerges and recedes is also the uncanny.

My female gaze suggests an ambivalence in the indeterminacies of identification. There are dissonant perspectives in my work. My photographs convey my awareness of images of femininity in the urban setting and my attempts to subvert a dominant patriarchal reading through mimicry, juxtapositions as well as adopting a standard documentary investigative approach. My work acknowledges Kristeva's location of the position of women in society in the patriarchal system as "perpetually at the boundary, the borderline, the edge, the outer line: the place where order shades into chaos, light into darkness" (cited in Burgin, 1996, p. 52). As well as photographing the highly visible projections of commodified femininity, my gaze was also lowered to litter, the discarded, often unnoticed refuse of advertising material that was on the streets. The latter approach to street photography, may be likened to Benjamin's (1983, p. 36) well-known description of Baudelaire's *flâneur* who most notably "goes botanising on the asphalt".



Las Vegas

13<sup>th</sup> June 1999

The imagery of women discarded in the street is litter. It is dirt. Interestingly, Irigaray identifies the patriarchal notion of femininity as the "shards", the "scraps: the uncollected debris". It is the scattered remnants of a violated sexuality (cited in Fuss, 1992, p. 720). Dirt and filth are also labels for pornographic material, and much of the matter that I photographed was pornographic in the sense that it was originally intended to incite a (male) sexual response or was an advertisement for sexual services.

A selection of my photographs relate to dirt in two ways: one as matter of aesthetics or hygiene of the street, and the other as an aspect of a male defined femininity.

Pornography removed from the intimacy of the private room and left in the public space of the street is literally "dirt as a matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966, p. 35). It is private matter made public.



Barcelona

25<sup>th</sup> June 1999

An example of 'woman' placed on the boundaries and as litter is in my photograph taken in Barcelona (25<sup>th</sup> June, 1999). The photograph consists of the lower half of elderly woman with a walking stick in the act of stepping near a discarded brochure, advertising the Museu de l'Erotica (abandoned on the street pavement in Las Ramblas). The brochure consists of an image of an Art Nouveau style painting of a bare backed young woman, similar to the image of the billboard take in Paris (14<sup>th</sup> July 1999). Her body cant with her left arm outstretched also conveys a casual abandon. Smaller images on the brochure include phallic shaped objects and a small map informing the passers-by of the location of the erotic museum. The photograph was taken at night and, with the use of the flash to expose the feminine elements, reflects the trope of 'the night as woman'.

In my photograph there is a contrast between two forms of femininity, as well as between age and youth. The older woman represents a matriarchal figure whereas the younger woman conveys aspects of the *femme fatale*. The juxtaposition can be associated with the uncanny. The aged woman who is walking alone in the street at night presents a view of matriarchy detached from the ideology of an older woman's place in the domestic, private space of the home.

Wilson (1995, p. 72) in her analysis of the nineteenth century metropolis, asserts that the androgynous woman, the lesbian, the prostitute are associated with the eroticisation of life in the city. Notably, the older matriarchal figure is absent from this discourse which suggests that a young fertile woman is seen as a 'figure of public pleasure' in the masculine landscape of modernity.

Laver (1969) and Flugel (1930) described the "Shifting Erogenous Zone" which in art and advertising emphasised different features of the female body, such as the back or legs and was used in order to prevent men from being sexually bored. However, it is not only certain features of the female body but youth that are eroticised. My camera is positioned at a high angle frames the older woman's legs and feet. An

image of these features taken from a position looking upwards, conventionally presents the legs as a fetish, thus sexualised. However, the potential sexual gaze does not occur because the view is looking downwards towards the feet. Also the woman's aged appearance does not contribute to the 'normal' (masculine) view of a sexually desirable woman. Youth represents sexuality, and this is further conveyed in the way young slender female bodies are depicted in the popular media. Aged women, however, are rarely depicted in similar ways to that of young women thus they are not deemed to have a desirable sexual 'persona'<sup>1</sup>. I read the older woman's movement as representing life. She is reality whereas the painting of the woman on the brochure is just a patriarchal fantasy; it is just an image.

The depiction of fallen leaves on the pavement under the woman's feet is also significant. Moreover, the aged woman and the fallen leaves both connote the moving towards the end of life or existence. An environmental consciousness is elicited in the depiction of the (almost lost) presence of nature in the built environment of the city. Indeed the expansion of the urban realm in the invasive growth of cities threatens to supplant the natural living world and our relationship with nature. Importantly in the construction of the photograph I do not confirm the patriarchal capitalist ideology of culture against nature. My photograph confirms Wilson's (1991, p. 8) previously stated assertion that women due to their socialisation "instead of setting nature against the city, they find nature *in* the city." For example, the natural leaves are juxtaposed with the constructed fabrication of the pavement. Likewise the older matriarchal 'real' woman is juxtaposed with the patriarchal mass-produced brochure of a young female.

The presence of the 'matriarchal' woman also challenges the stereotypical label of the 'lady of the night' associated with street prostitution which once marked, and perhaps still marks, the nocturnal topography of the city. I read the unaccompanied older woman as 'reclaiming the night'. Indeed "women's sense of security is profoundly shaped by our inability to secure an undisputed right to occupy that [public] space" (Hamner and Saunders cited in Rose, 1993, p. 34).

Historically in the city men tended to "experience the 'dark corners' of the metropolis as regions of adventure, of challenging danger, or self-affirmation" whereas for the majority of women access was denied or restricted (Schlor, 1998, p. 171). The presence of the older woman presents an authority figure, which seems to subvert the masculine supremacy and the masculine seduction by the nocturnal city.

In literature and art the common theme is that:

After the fall of darkness other powers rule than during the day. In the symbolism and myth of most peoples the night is chaos, the scene of dreams, it teems with ghosts and demons, like the sea with fish and sea-monsters. *It is female*, as the day is male, and like everything it brings quiet and terror at the same time. (Schivelbusch cited in Schlor, 1998, p. 169).

The night as feminine and the "the scene of dreams, ghosts and demons" present aspects of the uncanny which darkness evokes. On Las Vegas boulevard, which is also known as 'the strip', the themes of the uncanny, abject and waste are brought together in both the desolate female representation and the presence of the 'ghostly' male in one photograph, (13<sup>th</sup> June 1999) I took there.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paglia (1990, p. xiii) refers to personae as 'masks' .



Las Vegas

13<sup>th</sup> June 1999

The photograph consists of a bin with a pornography magazine in it. It symbolises Juliet Mac Cannell's metaphor of the 'trash can' to describe female subjectivity "Woman" she writes "is only seen in pieces (in part-objects, in the 'trash can' of overvalued zones of her body"(1986, p. 108). The metaphor of the trash canning of women is made literal in this image as well as in Irigaray's previous assertions about patriarchal femininity as 'shards, the uncollected debris'.

The woman on the cover of the 'entertainment' guide displays the characteristics of the *femme fatale*, such as long luxurious hair, a heavy lidded gaze, her mouth is also slightly apart and her reddened lips reflect sexual arousal. Body canting, the tilted head, the pouting mouth are commodified images of a fetishised female sexuality. These are 'over-valued zones' of femininity.

Pollock, in her analysis of one of Rosetti's paintings describes the depicted woman as "she is body; she is sexuality; she is danger" (1988, p. 142). The same comments are aptly suited to the woman on the magazine cover. "The *femme fatale* is a woman who lures men into danger, destruction, even death by means of her overwhelming charms" (Allen, 1983, p.v). However, the danger in the photograph in Las Vegas does not only relate to the fetishised female who represents danger for 'men' because she is in 'control' of her sexuality and a threat to public 'morality'. For me, as a woman, the depicted male also represents a masculine danger. This feeling is evoked in the common notion of the city at night as a dangerous place for an unaccompanied female.

In my photograph, a male is walking (on the footpath near the trash can) with his head slowly turning towards the camera. The male gaze towards my camera acknowledges my presence on the scene and leaves a trace of it in the photograph. As a woman and from my experience of walking in the street, the nocturnal city is a place of potential danger in terms of personal security. Advice to women in countless number of travel books, such as the *Lonely Planet Guides*, is for women to avoid walking alone in the city streets at night. Schlor summarises the common view that "the nocturnal city is a place of risk, of potential danger, and it is charged with sexuality" (1998, p.178). Thus for many females there is a self-imposed restriction

on the freedom of movement brought about by an awareness of the potentially sexually aggressive behaviour of males.

As a photographer, I considered myself in a dominant position because of the power associated with the operation of the camera in selecting and constructing a text. However, my gender does place me in a potentially precarious situation. The male in my photograph is blurred through my use of a low camera shutter speed. The strategy creates a sense of movement and illusion which I consider to be elements of the nocturnal city. The blurring also gives the male a somewhat ghostly appearance; it also renders him uncanny.

There is also horror and a feeling of dread that the *femme fatale*, which presents the dialectic of sexuality as a form of power and sexuality and as object of the male gaze, is disposed of in a bin. Unlike my previous photographs of billboards and walls, of *femme fatales*, my camera positioned at a high angle presents her female gaze as passively looking upwards from the abyss. Notably Cixous (1975, p. 885) uses the abyss to represent the area of femininity that men have established for women as being "too dark to be explorable". Furthermore, the female, like the prostitute, which Felski (1995) identifies as the figure of 'public pleasure', also represents "the abyss of a dangerous female sexuality linked to contamination, disease, and a breakdown of social hierarchies in the modern city" (Felski, 1995, p. 19). However, it is not woman as such who is abdicated, but rather woman as privileged signifier of that which man both fears and desires (Burgin, 1996, p. 55).

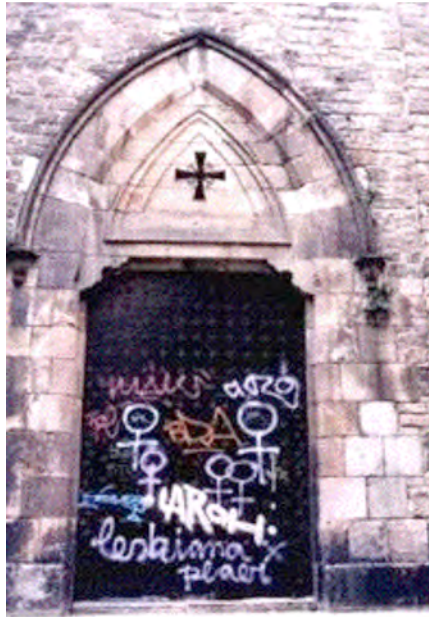
The female considered as dirt and dirt 'defined as a matter out of place' relates to Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. For Kristeva, "the abject is a condition of the unified,thetic subject, yet it is intolerable to it. Even at times of its greatest cohesion, the subject teeters on the brink of a yawning hole which threatens to draw it into it" (cited in Grosz, 1989, p. 73). The image of the female in the gaping void of the bin affirms Kristeva's comments.

Kristeva distinguishes between three broad forms of abjection against which social taboos and individual defenses are erected. There is abjection in relations to food, to waste (bodily fluids, the corpse) and to sexual difference. Gross describes Kristeva's notion of the abject as:

what beckons the subject ever closer to its edge. It insists on the subject's necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality – those relations which consciousness and reason find intolerable. The abject attests to the impossibility of clear borders, lines of demarcation or divisions between the proper and the improper, the clean and the unclean, order and disorder... (Grosz, 1989, p. 73)

The significance of boundaries or thresholds concerning sexuality is also represented in my photograph taken in Barcelona (25<sup>th</sup> June, 1999).





Barcelona 25<sup>th</sup> June, 1999

The photograph consists of the double side entry doors of a large Catholic Cathedral. The purpose of taking the photograph was to document the graffiti spray painted on the doors. In the photograph parts of the limestone church are visible along with the sign of the cross above the doorway. The graffiti on the doors mainly consists of the female symbol, repeated five times and the text "*Lesbiana plaer*" which translates from Catalan as 'lesbian pleasure'. Even without the knowledge of the Catalan language, the word '*lesbiana*' and the female symbols in graffiti represent a political statement to the western tourist. It also can be related to Cixous' assertion in which she draws on the American feminists' statement that " 'we are all Lesbians', that is don't denigrate woman, don't make of her what men have made of you" (1976, p. 882) Graffiti in public spaces has come to symbolise "violation, social anarchy and moral breakdown" (Gablik, 1984, p. 103). It is abject. It also can be interpreted as the political expression of an oppressed and disenfranchised part of the community.

Irigaray (1991, p.45) amongst other feminists is outspoken on the patriarchal views of the Catholic Church. She states that "let us not wait for the Phallus god to grant us his grace....". And this phallus god is everywhere, especially "in the holy catholic church, whose sovereign pontiff now thinks fit, once more, to forbid us contraception, abortion, extramarital relations, homosexuality etc. ". I consider that this graffiti is a form of protest in the context of its display on the Catholic Church doors and my documentation of this an overtly politically aware act, though the Pope, as well as certain sections of the public, would most likely consider the graffiti an act of vandalism propounding what Douglas (1966, p.7) asserts it the norm that "sacred things and place are to be protected from defilement".

In a feminist reading of the photographs the images of females gain meaning in relation to their location in the urban landscape. In my work I have represented patterns that reflect masculine culture. However I have tried to mimic and subvert the masculine (repressive) gaze. The indeterminance and intensity of the uncanny as a counter-aesthetic which evokes power and danger disrupts the traditional (masculine) perimeters and binaries. Moreover, there is critical attention to the

politics of space and interactions in which I try to avoid the sublime aesthetics associated representations of the city.

## References

Barlow, Tani E. (1997) 'Introduction: On "Colonial Modernity"', in Tani E. Barlow (ed), *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1-20.

China News Digest (CND) (2002) 'Sandstorm becomes Major Environmental Concern for 2008 Olympics', 18 March 2002, <http://www.cnd.org/Global/02/03/18/020318-2.html>.

— (2002) 'Sandstorm Leaves 30 000 Tons of Dust in Beijing', 24 March 2002, <http://www.cnd.org/Global/02/03/24/020324-2.html>.

Donald, Stephanie (1997) 'Landscape and Agency: *Yellow Earth* and the Demon Lover', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 14 (1): 97-112.

Duncan, James (1993). 'Sites of Representation: Place, Time and the Discourse of the Other', in James Duncan and David Ley (eds), *Place/Culture/Representation*, London: Routledge, pp. 39-56.

*Duzhe (Reader)* (2001) 'Baohu Muqin He, Gong Jian Duzhe Lin' ('Save the Mother River by Planting a Reader's Forest'), 4 (7): 32-3.

Fabian, Johannes (1983) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei (1998) *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Goodman, Bryna (1995) *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai 1853-1937*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Han Shaogong (1985) 'Wenxue de Gen' ('The Roots of Literature'), *Zuojia (Writers)*, 4 (2): 2-5.

*Heshang (River Elegy)* (1988) Beijing: China Central Television (CCTV), written and produced by Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang.

Jacka, Tamara (1998) 'Working Sisters Answer Back: The Representation and Self-Representation of Women in China's Floating Population', *China Information*, 13 (1): 43-75.

Jiang Xiaohe (1999) *Beijing de Huanjing (Beijing's Environment)*, Beijing: Beijing Huanjing Baohu Jijinhui.

Li Pingri (1999) 'China's Natural Disasters and Global Climate Change in 1998', in *China Environment 1998*, Hong Kong: Greenpeace China, pp. 16-21.

Lu Xun (Lu Hsun) (1972) 'My Old Home', in Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (trans), *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, pp. 54-64.

Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang (1991) 'The Reader's Guide', in Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, trans. Richard W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan, Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, pp. 101-222.

Wang, Jing (1996) *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Zhao Yuan (1993) *Dizhizi: Xiangcun Xiaoshuo yu Nongmin Wenhua (The Son of the Earth: Novels of the Countryside and Peasant Culture)*, Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe Zongfaxing.

*Zhongguo Qing Jihui Tongji* (China Youth Development Foundation News) (2000) 'Baohu Muqin He, Gong Jian Duzhe Lin' ('Save the Mother River by Planting a Reader's Forest'), 9 (12): 1-4.

**Note on the author:** Panizza Allmark is near completion of her Ph.D in the School of Communications and Multimedia at Edith Cowan University. Her dissertation *Un Voyage Vers Une Photographie Féminine* explores her work as a journey documentary photographer in relation to the concepts of *écriture féminine*. Her commissioned photographic work has also been exhibited in over ten exhibitions and has explored issues of culture, human rights and heritage. She is currently working on a documentary project which examines uncanny urban landscapes.