

UP FROM ABSTRACTION

John Haber - 2007-8

Artillery Magazine

CLAIRE SEIDL

Claire Seidl's photographs (Lesley Heller Gallery) of a rural home have the strangeness of photograms, with intense light sources that produce shadows alternately brooding and crisp. I thought of other personal landscapes in black-and-white, by Eileen Brady Nelson. However, Seidl accumulates much more architectural and human detail. Sunlight through the imperfections in worn windows, normally invisible, creates the dense tracery of a rainy night. Spheres of light hover in the middle of a room, as in the preposterous spirit world staged in nineteenth-century photography.

Those spheres turn out to be older family members and friends seated at dinner. The more one looks, the more they take on recognizable shapes and personalities. The artist says that they enjoyed recognizing themselves. The coalescing blobs let others join, too, in the humor and animation. To add to the sense of realism, the course of a meal necessarily constrains and defines the long exposure. However, that again sounds too much like metaphysics for a party.

Seidl's photographs suggest multiple time scales and points of view even when they do not play tricks. The most abstract do not need long exposures at all.

None involve special processing later. The grayness emphasizes layered rectangles of windows and wood frame. No doubt abstraction once both incorporated and rebelled against the idea of a picture as a window onto nature. However, one should not foist theories of art on these photographs, not when one can watch the encroaching darkness.

At the dinner table, the time scales become particularly explicit. One has the shot, the original scene, the gap between generations observing and observed, and the deep history of New England, as preserved in the aging wood of the ceiling. The five years of work in the show, the endurance of a photograph, and the viewer's commitment all have scales of their own. The elderly move that much closer still to a longer view, perhaps the eternity of those glowing spheres. In another photograph, an empty chair faces the brightest glow of all, seemingly at an angle apart from the light source. There light must have found something off which to reflect in the night sky, but even the artist had to wonder at its reality.

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