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Exhibition Review

Home Alone Together, curated by Aaron Rosen and S. Billie Mandle

Accessible at <https://imagejournal.org/exhibitions-home-alone-together/>

In book twelve of his *Confessions*, Augustine tells God that there is no better name for God's "heaven of heaven" than God's "house" (*domum tuam*). It is in the home, in the *domus*, that the "pure heart enjoys absolute concord and unity in the unshakable peace of holy spirits". Augustine goes so far as to say that his soul begs to be inside the home. It is the only thing for which his soul yearns. Riffing on a passage of the Psalms, he writes that his soul's "single request" is that it may "dwell in God's house all the days of its life". In his *Confessions*, Augustine not only compares God's home to heaven, he also claims that the home *is* heaven; home is where "absolute concord and unity" can be enjoyed.¹

Augustine's enthusiasm for the home, his declaration that it is "heaven of heaven" seems uncanny in a time of quarantine. For those of us lucky enough to have permanent shelter, the four walls and roof over our heads can feel more akin to a personal hell than to a place of eternal domestic bliss. A kitchen that has been adapted to fit the experiments of your child's science class, a bathroom that now doubles as a greenhouse to fit your growing collection of plants, and a bedroom that also functions as office space: our houses are stretching to incorporate our confined lives. Thus, the buildings meant to be most intimate to us, the ones that makes us feel as though we can turn inside from out, as though we can delineate between "private" and "public" spheres, have necessarily needed to hold *more*. Our homes now function as more than space that provides reprieve from the workday, more than space within which to cook and clean and sleep. Our homes are now functioning in ways that exceed what we

1 Augustine 1991, 252.

thought they once were. We can no longer believe the home to be an interior space constituted by four walls meant to keep the communal out.

In May 2020, professor of religion and visual culture Dr. Aaron Rosen, and Massachusetts-based artist Billie Mandle, whose work focuses on the politics, histories, and paradoxes of place, came together to launch an exhibition titled *Home Alone Together*. The exhibition, supported and featured by *Image*, a journal representing art and literature, ran for twelve consecutive weeks during the summer of 2020, hosted by the journal's webpage. Collating the work of 25 artists from across the globe, Rosen and Mandle probe the theme of domesticity. Submitting an image each week, either of their living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, gardens, kitchens or of a mixture of the people and things found within these, the contributing artists allow us into spaces that are intimately their own. Through the content of their homes, they provide us with images of the objects and people that constitute themselves.

As visitors move through the virtual exhibition space, we can choose to view the photographs in categories sorted by either room, week, or artist. Each image is captioned first with the space in which it was taken (bathroom, kitchen, living room, etc.), and then with a title, the artist's name, and date. One never gets a sense that one is touring through the artist's home. Instead, carefully framed images of bodies, books, and blankets flood the frame such that the image seems as though it could have been taken from anywhere, from inside anyone's home. In week one, photographer and book-maker Claudia Hermano, interested in themes of home and belonging, contributes a photo, "Bedroom" (12 April 2020), in which we see a cascade of blue. The fitted bedsheet just slept in, unmade from the night before, evokes familiarity as it ripples, wave-like, across the mattress. In week three, Amsterdam-based artist Yvonne Lacet, whose work centers cityscapes, landscapes, and nature play, includes an image, "Kitchen" (26 April 2020), in which plant life develops; a thin and fragile root, much like the one that currently shoots out from the clippings of my own quarantine-era philodendron, spirals out atop vibrant green. And in week five, London-based artist Aude Hérail Jäger, who is inspired by dualities and finding meaning in the immediate environment, provides a silhouetted shadow of a body bathing in sunlight: "Bedroom" (8 May 2020). Through these images, which stage the particularities of everyday life, the air of the online exhibition is filled with a sense of the personal that somehow, miraculously, one may even say "heavenly", speaks to us universally.

Stirring feelings of what is familiar, the artists' close-up frames provide obscured views of laundry lines, shadow puppets, and bodies splayed across

living-room floors. These views, not quite unique to one home, but not quite not, render the photographs universalizable. During a time when we feel alone, forced to reconcile with new realities, and trapped inside them, the exhibit connects us via the spaces that protect but also trap us. Comprising the mundane objects which constitute a bathroom, a bedroom, a kitchen, the images echo the objects that, if we are lucky enough, also texture our everyday. An orange towel splashed across a blue tiled floor (“Bathroom”, Sam Winston, 27 June 2020), a boy shrouded in a sheet as he plays piano (“Living Room, Buffalo New York”, Yola Monakhov Stockton, 15 June 2020); through that which is immanent the photographs allow us to transcend the monotony that is our own. Through what is commonplace, they invite us to miraculously be any place. Through a play with what is familiar, they make us feel connected through the things which surround us in our homes.

Roles of toilet paper centered by Justin Kimball and Sam Winston, vibrant collections of fruits and vegetables soaking in soapy water as framed by Guler Ates, spaces of sex and sleep transformed by Alyssa Coffin, Michael Takeo Magruder, Claudia Hermano, Gol Kamra, and Yola Monakhov Stockton; all of these are crafted into photographs that ocularly arouse.² Thus, these spaces of washing and bathing and cooking and fucking meant to be inhabited only by those most intimately connected are exposed. The photographs appeal because they render the intimate public. Thus, the artist’s space becomes a snapshot upon which the world is meant to gaze. In this way, the images, as well as the artists who have photographed them and the curators who have staged them, open a space for connection by means of the home meant otherwise, and especially right now, to keep us apart.

The artists in this exhibition push against what it means, or what we think it means, to be “domestic”. The previously private domestic life (considered historically to be the realm of the womb and women) has been positioned in opposition to the public, the world of labor, economy, politics, and man. This exhibition invites the public eye into what we have deemed as the private, advancing our notions of what it means to be domestic, to be at home. Forging connections through the spaces that we consider as our most intimate, the artists transform the binary of private and public life.

2 “Bathroom”, Justin Kimball, April 18, 2020; “Bathroom”, Sam Winston, April 18, 2020; “Kitchen, Fruit Bath”, Guler Ates, May 15, 2020; “Bedroom”, Alyssa Coffin, April 18, 2020; “Bedroom, Spare Room, Physical Record”, Michael Takeo Magruder, May 22, 2020; “Bedroom”, Claudia Hermano, May 22, 2020; “Bedroom”, Gol Kamara, June 12, 2020; “Bedroom”, Yola Monakhov Stockton, April 12, 2020.

While the exhibit predominantly centers the spaces of the home, other images captioned “Outside” are featured as well. Some “Outside” photographs center the OPEN signs hung on boarded-up corner stores (“Outside”, Barbara Takenaga, 22 May 2020) while others are of flyers that announce blood drives (“Outside”, Jordan Eagles, 17 June 2020). Many photos that fall into the “Outside” category feature community protests in response to Black lives lost due to police violence over the summer. One image of her sons by Janna Ireland, contributed on 24 May, is particularly poignant because of the history of blackness in America to which it speaks. As a caption to her photograph of her sons Ireland writes,

Posting early because this day is so heavy, and this is a picture about love and closeness. The feeling of watching Minneapolis burn last night was indescribable. My heart was full and empty and broken all at once, and today I am so tired. I have been trying and failing to organize my thoughts about this week, and George Floyd, and the wounds his death has prodded. The thought that keeps circling is that all of the pictures I share of my children are a form of propaganda, and that the idea they are trying to sell is that my people are people, and that we have a right to our lives. This world is absurd, but there is nowhere else to go. It is an awful kind of relief to have my longstanding fears – those of a mother of black children living in the United States – to distract me from my new fears about parenting during a pandemic. I know these old fears intimately, at least.

The exhibition highlights the contours and contrasts of identity. Ireland’s photograph speaks to these contours, and the impossibility of ever *really* getting beyond them, despite the feelings of connection that images can evoke. In other words, our identities, while they enable connection, also segregate us into racialized, stigmatized, and ostracized groups. The things which make us individually ourselves and thus able to connect with others implicate our social privilege or marginalization. The exhibition calls attention to these disparities of identities as much as to familiarities that can be drawn between them. Ireland’s photo traces life’s limits and edges. It alludes to the idea that there are certain experiences of race, of class, of sexuality that are more familiar to some than to others. In this way it forces us to attend to all the spaces in our lives that lack connection. It makes us realize that even through art connection is not always possible. Ireland’s photo and the accompanying caption evoke absurdity, fear, feelings of disconnection. Ireland’s photo is one

within the exhibition that brings disconnection to the fore so as to make viewers grapple with it.

In a recent interview with *Poet's Country*, philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler commented that it is “hard to stay sensate during these times, to see and feel and hear what is happening”.³ The exhibition *Home Alone Together* invites us to stay sensate. It invites us to attend to what is happening around us.

After all, *Home Alone Together* is a project of collaboration. The artists and curators summon us to come together as they have. They encourage us to notice our everyday, to look around and see so as to feel the ripples of blue in our slept-in bedsheets, the green roots growing, despite all odds, out from the leaves we clipped months ago, the way the light catches our bodies and casts us, silhouetted, onto our four walls. Perceiving others' lives as they continue inside the walls that separate them from us, we are invited to notice and thus feel connected through what is otherwise socially distant. The exhibition instantiates a feeling of connection through the places where we dwell. In so doing, it contributes to the very revolution of relating that is taking place in our midst. *Home Alone Together* is art that invites us to attend to our own surroundings through its attention to the surroundings of the artists. In this way the exhibition, to borrow language from Augustine, transforms the home through image into a place where “absolute concord and unity” can be enjoyed. This unity does not depend upon the home being “heavenly”, though. Rather, it depends upon sharing intimacies. The exhibition is a sight of transcendence. It encourages us to get beyond ourselves through the places we call “home”.

A selection of works from *Home Alone Together* will be shown alongside an exhibition by Julia Alcamo titled *All We Have Stories* at the Dadian Gallery in the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts & Religion in Washington, DC in the spring of 2021. Until it can be experienced in person, the exhibition will be shared through virtual tours and videos. It will be kept open until it can be shared in person, probably not before the summer.

Bibliography

- Augustine, 1991, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Butler, Judith, 2020, An Interview with Judith Butler, *Poet's Country*, <https://poetscountry.com/An-Interview-with-Judith-Butler> [accessed 7 December 2020].

3 Butler 2020.