

Absence is the presence of the absent, and it becomes real, it begins
to live, only when it is seen, felt and recorded by somebody

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Blue BOOK

A Land Called Lost

*There is a land called Lost
at peace inside our heads.*

*The moon, full on the frost,
vivifies these stone heads.*

*Moods of the verb “to stare”,
split selfhoods, conjugate
ice-facets from the air,
the light glazing the light.*

Look at us, Queen of Heaven.

*Our solitudes drift by
your solitudes, the seven
dead stars in your sky.*

(Geoffrey Hill, “I. Ave Regina Coelorum (Es ist ein Land Verloren...)”,¹

What happens when photography is freed from the spell of the decisive moment”? Strangely, it begins to move even less. It discovers a new stillness, not of arrested motion, but one that unfolds in the slow inner time of the photographer and the viewer. None of the objects on the tables with which *Blue Book* (Steidl, 2009) begins and ends can move on its own. The tables themselves, together with everything else in the rooms they are in, would remain perfectly still if left to themselves. And that is what seems to have happened to them: they have been abandoned. Yet, as we look at them, the desolation they embody begins to evoke a profundity of feeling that gradually compels us to experience the paradox of absence.

Absence is the presence of the absent, and it becomes real, it begins to live, only when it is seen, felt and recorded by somebody. In photography, what the viewer is left with, then, are eternally twinned absences: one that drew the photographer to itself and, once the photograph is made, the absence of the photographer herself. So, each of the two rooms confronts the viewer with a ghost contemplating its ghosts. The viewer’s presence, together with that of the picture being looked at, is defined against this ghostliness. And what “moves” between them, what the ghosts have left behind, is this stillness imbued with feeling.

Empty spaces – together with chairs, clothes, beds bereft of their users – have long been the subject of Dayanita Singh’s art. Yet, in *Blue Book*’s terminal photographs of empty rooms, and within the sequence they begin and end, two immense changes have taken place: the entry of colour and a momentous freeing of space. Neither change leads away from the essential journey of Dayanita’s work, its movement

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¹ “Two Choral Preludes on Melodies by Paul Celan”, in *Tenebrac*, 1978 (Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems*, London, Penguin, 1985, p. 165).



towards inwardness and clarity without dispelling the work’s core of silence, even as it continues to be nourished by the world of words. Her title, *Blue Book*, evokes colour as well as the reading and making of books. Publications as diverse as Tiffany’s annual catalogue, official reports on genocide or the state of education and Wittgenstein’s class-notes have borne that cryptic title. Yet the work allows no explicit connection, nor does it disavow any reference, to these worlds of exquisite commodities, documented facts or philosophical reflection. Neither are the myriad histories of blue – melancholy song, a modern painter’s monochromes or the love-god’s radiant skin – overtly alluded to. There are no dates and places, no identity, geographical or otherwise, given to these spaces, even as the viewer is left to absorb the unprecedented scale of emptiness or the sheer expanse of vision within the sequence. Where are these industrial sites? What do they make? Where are the people who make what they make? Are we seeing these places at dawn or dusk? It is only when we free ourselves from these questions of fact, which *Blue Books* usually collate, that we begin to hear the still, sad music of these vastitudes. In the same way, colour, in this work, is not a question of enhanced realism, of moving closer to what things really look like, but almost its opposite. The eponymous blue, where it does appear, is the result of working both with and against the limitations of daylight film, of turning the very constraints of the film’s reaction to colour temperature and light into an accidental freedom from documentary realism. This is a movement towards colour as fiction rather than fact – the forging of a code without a key that seems to emanate more from the eye, and from the story of the eye, than from what it is looking at.

The inscrutability of *Blue Book* is, however, richly inflected. Its reticence does not arise from an absence or exclusion of reference, but from a complete absorption of certain histories of photography and painting into its own ways of seeing and telling. Photographs of factories would immediately bring to mind the documentary or “industrial” work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and of their students at the Düsseldorf Art Academy in Germany, especially Andreas Gursky. The precision and impersonality with which they went about photographing industrial or public structures and spaces created a language of exactitude and objectivity, of scale and typology, which became the basis of what amounted to a classical ideal in modern European art photography. A Becher water-tower or Gursky aerial view became photography’s Grecian urn. Breathing human passion far above, it worked through a chilling exclusion of human feeling (and, in the Bechers, of human presence) to embody the truth of things as they are. But this also took

documentary photography into the realm of beauty, however abstract or inhuman that beauty might appear to be. This is the genre of photography, with its own documentary and aesthetic ideals, that *Blue Book* invokes, only to transform it profoundly from within. The absence of human beings, which was part of the impersonality of the Bechers' mode of documentation, becomes, in *Blue Book*, the very opposite of such impersonality, suffusing an industrial landscape with the luminous mystery and spaciousness of human emotion. The rigour with which every detail of a structure is recorded by the Bechers and their school becomes, in *Blue Book*, a capacity to infuse architecture or landscape with the intriguing vagaries of light, texture and tone.

There are unexpected details in *Blue Book* that subtly provoke human reactions and questions, trigger memories, connections and associations that complicate the eye's wish to be unfeelingly objective. What are the red stains on that giant machine, looking so much more vivid than rust? What is in that plastic bag, a bit of which can be seen next to a plant with white blossom in the murky foreground of a photograph of possibly a warehouse with collapsing roofs? Is that a human form near the vanishing point of a long vista of machines? Why does that gigantic breast or eye of steel seem to oversee a scene of obscure crime? Why do the rubber pipe and the dark liquid on the floor, in the same photograph, make one think of an *abattoir*? What will I find if I go up to the small clearing of water in the grass? And, here and there, the spilling out of a warm light from within the cold metallic blue (a chamber with two lighted windows looking like a face peering out of a wilderness of roofs), or a distant glimpse of hills, mists, trees and water, works into this non-human symphony of monochromes delicate suggestions of other forms of being that are pushed out, dwarfed or concealed, and yet are irrepressible in their fragility.

The stillness of *Blue Book*, and the ineffable emotional tone of that stillness, also emanates from its opening image. This table with the remains of a meal on it – human, but comfortless, placed against a bare old wall and two doors that seem carved out of darkness – places the sequence that follows within a tradition of painting that is almost the polar opposite of modern German photography. For Barthes, Nicéphore Niépce's *heliogravure* of a dinner table, made in the 1820s, was “the first photograph”.² With it, Niépce had made something utterly new as well as very old – a still life that would bring to photography an eye steeped in the memory of paintings. To open *Blue Book* with the close, warm gloom of a Flemish still life is to give a specifically interior origin to its subsequent freeing of space. The mesmeric allure of the



² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 86.

eye being able to see as far as it can begins with the peculiar oppressiveness of inhabited spaces. This painterly quality also tunes the eye, from the very beginning, to get away from colour as it is habitually seen in photography. So, not only is colour linked to tone and feeling, but it also becomes a principle of beauty. We savour its lushness and delicacy even as we respond to the desolation of the vistas or the coldness of the interiors, and these conflicting responses take us far beyond categories like “industrial photography”.

Tables, beds and other rectangular forms receding from the picture-plane towards a distance that the photograph cannot hold were part of the fiction of “going away closer” in Dayanita’s work before *Blue Book*. It was impossible to decide whether these were images of departure or of arrival. So they became images of the inseparability of departure and arrival, mirroring those other inseparables, freedom and loss – the gift of freedom and the cost of it, going away and letting go. In *Blue Book*, these movements seem to acquire a transcendent quality through a dramatic elevation and expansion of the eye, matched by a startling change of scenario. Intimacy appears to have been left far behind and below for a solitude that is almost sublime. Yet, the story refuses to be simply one of transcendence, of liberation from the claustrophobia of intimate spaces into a cold, blue, inhuman vastness. The blank wall and the doors of darkness in the first image open into another impasse of closed doors in the next, until a blinding white light breaks in to take the eye towards what promises to be another scale of vision. But this stretching of the limits of vision to the utmost ultimately brings *Blue Book* back to a magically forlorn place on the ground, to a darkening sky and treetops on the other side of what looks like part of a high prison-wall. Is the wall opening up or closing in? We cannot quite fathom the reason behind its incompleteness, whether it is being built or has been abandoned. And the blue of the open skies is echoed in the blue of the wall’s hard glow, while the failing light allows the grass its last moments of being green.

Colour and light bring no deliverance in the last image of *Blue Book*. Here the light is of the harshest white. The old white wall is back, with a window in it that is painted white and firmly shut. This is a first-aid room – hence, literally sterile. With a medicine trolley, narrow bed and folded-up stretcher, its aesthetic – if one can talk of such a thing – is defined by the eclipse of blue by white (except for the vague shadow near the floor on the left and the borders of the bowls). It is also defined by the coldness of enamel, steel and wrought-iron, and by the mingling of septic and antiseptic in the imagined smell of the room. The glass bottles of antiseptic on the trolley are the

only objects in the room that have the warm lustre of jewels. This is a room that has learnt to care and not to care, to deal with human damage clinically, without a need for the sublime. To deliver human beings to the fate of their bodies is the only deliverance it understands. With it, *Blue Book* finishes at a place where the differences between white and blue, coldness and warmth, human and inhuman are resolved only in the starkness of being able to see things as they are, and then, in being able to find a language for this vision. J. M. Coetzee often reaches this place at the end of his novels. He got to it at the end of *Disgrace*, and of *Slow Man*: “‘Is this love, Paul? Have we found love at last?’ ... He puts on his glasses again, turns, takes a good look at her. In the clear late-afternoon light he can see every detail, every hair, every vein. He examines her, then he examines his heart. ‘No’, he says at last, ‘this is not love. This is something else. Something less.’”³

³ J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2005, p. 263.