



## **Vivid Voids: An Interview with Britland Tracy**

by Melinda Barlow

**Melinda Barlow:** The images in *Rupture* are both alluring and unsettling, representational and abstract. Their color draws you in, but you wonder what you are really looking at. The titles add to this uncertainty rather than relieving it. What inspired the series? How and when did it begin?

**Britland Tracy:** *This series began during a time in my life when I noticed that my normally very good memory was betraying me more than usual. I found myself writing down fragments of memories and words that were spoken to me so as not to forget them when I woke up the next day. I was already making work using appropriated images of violence from mass media, but the results were too representational. I wanted to see what the accumulation of trauma looks like, visually – what happens when it piles up on itself, becomes a palimpsest. What happens to our own minds when we are subjected to a slow drip of violence day after day, year after year. Capturing a single event does not do this; condensing multiple events into one memory, one image, does. At its core, this series is all about erasure by way of accumulation – on film or in the human psyche.*

**MB:** Describe the technique you used to create the photographs. What accounts for their vibrant – and subtle – hues?

**BT:** *My creative process tends to revolve around a set of conceptual constructs, in which the aesthetic qualities become the byproduct, almost secondary to the ‘rules’ that manifested them. That being said, I do enjoy creating images that have enough visual appeal to hold the viewer’s attention. In the case of this series, my constructs were: 1) the image must emerge from an interpersonally violent scene in a film or TV show, and 2) its exposure must match the duration of the scene itself. The scenes I chose contain murders, sexual assaults, domestic violence, lynchings, hate crimes, and verbal abuse. As each scene unfolds, and the gestures and lights compile onto my camera’s sensor, they obliterate themselves into abstracted, often vivid stains – or ‘bruises’. The visual indicators of violence are actually what create the contrast, color, and washes of light throughout the images, as most of the scenes take place at night, in enclosed spaces illuminated by lamps or streetlights or headlights, with competing light temperatures and rapid movements and shifts in camera position. This way of working is not without precedence of course. Hiroshi Sugimoto used nearly two-hour long exposures to photograph historical movie theaters in the 1990s, which transformed feature length films into bright white voids.*

**MB:** How did you choose which scenes to re-photograph? Did they have to meet particular criteria?

**BT:** *I have to admit – while I claim to follow specific guidelines and conceptual underpinnings to create my work, the personal and the visceral always manage to sneak their way in. While ‘vetting’ scenes for this series, I tried to pay attention to what they triggered in me. The first scenes I photographed were the ones I remembered being nearly unable to watch the first time – the ones that managed to render the most heinous but shrouded acts of human-on-human abuse in a way that made me want to curl up in the fetal position and turn off the TV. So, the very act of creating these images was a sort of simulated re-traumatization that required me setting up my camera in front of each scene in a light-tight room, at night, alone, with both camera and tripod serving as barriers or ‘mediators’ between my eyes and the screen, and watching them over and over and over again until they were adequately framed and condensed into singular images. By this point, the emotional affect was gone, and I found myself numbed from the over-exposure.*



**MB:** It's fascinating that acts of violence depicted in mainstream films and television programs erased through long exposures leave such spectacular traces in their wake. What makes the images compelling and disconcerting is that they are so beautiful, and formal beauty in art with controversial content is sometimes distrusted. I'm thinking here of the series *Power Places* (1981-83) and *Smoke* (1988-89) by photographer John Pfahl, and David Maisel's *The Lake Project* (2001-02; 2015) and *Terminal Mirage* (2003). What role does beauty play in your work?

**BT:** *I think it's important to note that before I ever watched or touched these scenes, they existed in their cinematic forms. All I'm doing is further alchemizing the lights, gestures, cuts, and colors that already exist into colorful, dreamy stains. They were beautiful, in a way, before I got to them. They are not to be trusted, and maybe that's the point.*

**MB:** Each image invites our projection onto various elements within the frame – beds, lamps, faces, colors, bits of text – all vestiges of stories difficult to grasp because they are present and absent at the same time. Well-suited to West Texas, the *Rupture* series is thus in conversation with the Minimalism historically associated with Marfa.

**BT:** *Minimalism and the Light and Space Movement are both historically concerned with the primacy of perception – of light, space, and the gestalt of an object, stripped of peripheral context. I'm drawn to the way James Turrell renders light into washes of color that can almost reset your internal chemistry after sitting with his pieces for a period of time, or the way that a seemingly neutral and precise Agnes Martin grid can reveal small human touches and subtleties after a lengthy encounter. Rupture aligns itself with many of the aesthetic qualities of these movements, which have continued to influence Marfa from the inside-out, in that the images in the series lack representational form and call attention to subtle plays of light and color. However, they are not without content, and do not depend on their surrounding environment for context in the way that say, Robert Irwin relies on outside conditions for his installation of picture windows at Chinati. It's the accumulation of content, in fact, that renders the images so vacant. The absence of form in the images is an additive, rather than subtractive, quality.*

**MB:** Who else do you consider your aesthetic next of kin for *Rupture* and why?

**BT:** *In addition to Sugimoto's movie theaters, I would also include Robert Heinecken's Surrealism on TV (1986), which appropriates images of newscasters into rotating 35mm slide projections. This was the beginning of photographers looking at mass media, breaking it down, and recontextualizing it to explore its psychological effects and inherent power structures, as well as the visual absurdity of its surface. Carrie Mae Weems' Slow Fade to Black (2010) is another major influence, as in this series she extracts and obfuscates pre-existing publicity photos of black female performers like Ella Fitzgerald, Josephine Baker, and Lena Horne into blurred, monochromatic portraits that are quite literally fading from recognition, just as these important women have slipped through the cracks of cultural memory. I'm moved by how Weems allows their forms barely to emerge from clouds of color, simultaneously calling attention to their existence and erasure.*

**MB:** *Rupture* is also in conversation with the history of representing women and other minorities in film and television, a history that routinely depicts their psychological humiliation and eroticizes their violent deaths. Such gaslighting denies the cultural significance of symbolic killings off in art and is blind to the fact that they reinforce a larger, systemic pattern in life, regarding them, instead, as anomalous plot points disconnected from social events. Rebecca Solnit has written about this recently in *Recollections of My Nonexistence: A Memoir* (2020).



**BT:** *We are, at this very moment, watching a sort of cultural revolution unfold before our eyes after being exposed to 8 minutes and 46 seconds of a very real, calculated, and deeply un-cinematic murder – an extremely specific event that symbolizes every other hate crime that has gone un-documented, and therefore unseen, unheard, unacknowledged. Every now and then, a video of a celebrity beating up his girlfriend or a police officer killing an unarmed black man shows up, but since the advent of photography, these acts have been on the periphery of documentation, so we turn to their fictitious, cinematic twins to repeat back to us what we think we know about something that we have probably never seen or experienced firsthand. We know what war looks like, we know what hurricanes and tornadoes look like, we know what genocide looks like. We don't know what the terrorizing of a transperson looks like behind closed doors. We don't know what marital rape looks like. We don't know what a lynching with no witnesses looks like, or the murder of a homeless man in an ally at night, or the psychological degradation of a gaslighting partner or parent. I am not trying to hinge this body of work onto the current cultural zeitgeist, but the masturbatory role of the image when it comes to normally unseen and unheard violence is something that is occupying our attention more than usual right now. This series began, quite frankly, as my own way of processing the cognitive effects of being abused for years. I can't re-watch my own trauma – no one was filming it – but I can watch a movie that pretends to be about it. And then I can put it on repeat, the same way I replay a memory, until it compresses and distorts into a blur containing everything and nothing. Sadly, that's about as close as any of us can get 99% of the time. Something analogous to Anais Nin's diary entry about losing her pain and not yet being accustomed to its absence.*

**MB:** Like *Rupture*, your artist book *Show Me Yours* (2018) and the zine you created in collaboration with Kellye Eisworth, *Pardon My Creep* (2020), each bring to light experiences and interactions that have gone un-documented. How do you see the relationship between these three bodies of work?

**BT:** *It's taken me awhile to figure out the through-line of the seemingly disparate series I've created over the past few years. Am I interested in interiors? Yes, but not exclusively, and not for their own sake. Why are all of these series about people, yet none include actual people? I suppose there's an ongoing interest in projection that holds my attention. There's something about the performance of the self, of human connection and discord, and the infrastructures that facilitate and complicate these dynamics that continues to fascinate me. What is the role of text – never written by me, always extracted from my source material – and what does it contribute to my photographs? There is a quote by Toni Morrison in the catalog essay titled "The Fisherwoman" written in conjunction with Robert Bergman's portraits of strangers (A Kind of Rapture, 1998), in which she describes our relationships with others as a tri-fold amalgamation of images, words, and experience. That's it – an interpersonal arithmetic problem, whose answer serves as the foundation for how we position ourselves in the world. I think that's why words have seeped their way into my projects, whether they appear in the form of full-length diary entries, creepy-sad Tinder messages, or 'last lines' from movie scenes that read as non-sequiturs. Answers and conclusions interest me far less than the questions I can frame with my work, such as: How is desire for a stranger performed over the internet, both earnestly and apathetically (Pardon My Creep)? How do the diary and the bedroom serve as 'containers' for masculine vulnerability (Show Me Yours)? How do cinematic representations of certain types of violence reflect, sensationalize, anaesthetize, illuminate, and recirculate very real, often un-documented trauma? These bodies of work look nothing like each other, but they all address the ways that human beings relate to themselves and to others.*

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