

Three Empty Weeks in July - New Photographs by Marie Tomanova

There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time.

—John Cage

The infinite is in the finite of every instant.

—Zen Proverb

In Kyoto, Japan there is a fifteenth-century Zen rock garden called Ryōan-ji that stands in opposition to the rational circle with the discipline of its circumference in which every point is equidistant from its clear center point—all is visible, measurable, and understandable with mathematical precision. At Ryōan-ji, an inspiration for figures such as John Cage who connects time to structure, there are fifteen groups of stones of different sizes—one group of five stones, two groups of three, and two groups of two—arranged on carefully raked white gravel so that no matter where one stands, one stone cannot be seen. Unlike the circle, there is always something invisible, missing, not there, absent, beyond comprehension. This is life, this is time, this is memory, this is identity and conception of self. This is *Three Empty Weeks in July*, in which Marie Tomanova set out on January 1, 2022 to take an instant photograph every day for the period of precisely one year. And yet this simple, rational, clearly delineated project spiraled into something else. Some days she would take several photos, always of herself, in twos, threes, fours, fives, etc.—multiples that in themselves became an opportunity to work through conceptions of self, sometimes aesthetical, sometimes emotional, sometimes something else that is less discernible.

To do work like this—daily—one comes up against the towering discipline of artists such as Hannah Darboven, or maybe more critically On Kawara, in which series, order, and time become freeing or haunting. Each day becomes the search for a moment of performance that is consuming, sometimes exhilarating and sometimes exhausting. Life and work meet in an uneasy relationship in which each is about the other. And sometimes there is no inspiration but the structure, the need to keep going. And sometimes there is what can at first be seen as failure, that which is missing, those three weeks in July during which Tomanova did not take photographs. But that is to view the project from the standpoint of the circle, and not the depth of the immaterial that is displayed so well at Ryōan-ji—those three empty weeks in July become the strength of Tomanova's project, that one stone that cannot be seen from anywhere.

Those missing weeks stand in for all that cannot be seen or understood. They stand in for the photos that are not shown, the moments behind the camera that cannot be seen, the life and depth of self that is not captured on film. One sees a photograph and thinks they understand something, but what they are really seeing is a ghost, a trace, one moment in a temporal sequence that is just one of many.

Three Empty Weeks in July reverberates, too, with the idea of failure, an unrealized goal, and the persistent questions of why. But it also manifests the strong will to go on—those three missing weeks come mid-year, not at the end—and so Tomanova continues knowing that her project has changed, but also perhaps more importantly with a clearer idea of who she is and what her work is about—the one stone that can never be seen, the impossibility of some meta-level or universal understanding conveyed by the fiction of the circle. Maybe that structure connected to time with rigor and precision is not who she is, not who she will ever be. Maybe it is unimportant.

The ideas of failure and struggling to find oneself—particularly through work, through art—are a fascinating aspect of the exhibition at C24 Gallery in which Tomanova has inscribed her 2022 photography series onto the backs of her 2005-2010 painting practice through laying-out and photographing each month on the reverse of twelve paintings from her earlier practice, a medium that she had abandoned upon moving to the United States, unsure of herself and of who she was, before finding herself as a photographer. The face of the unseen paintings become a mystery that is reinforced by what they could be through the connection with the paintings Tomanova produced for this exhibition, a practice that has been revisited beginning in December 2023. These new paintings are all variations on self, a subject that speaks to a contemporary culture saturated with an obsession with identity.

It would be a romantic dream, or the perfect completion of a circle, to be able to say that Tomanova's painting practice began to take hold in those three empty weeks in July, like a Rohmerian narrative of summer punctuated by quotidian details and the stillness that comes with long summer days. It would be nice to be able to align the missing weeks of photography with something, to explain it, to justify it, to substantiate it, but that would be to give it a rationality and reason that is simply not present; it would be to try to circumscribe precise points of intersection that define something, something that would then stand in the way of the expansion of meaning that comes with the reverie of what actually is or could possibly be. To substantiate those three weeks would be to see the one stone that is never visible at Ryōan-ji, and to dispel the enchantment of the unknown, or the yet to be understood.

—Thomas Beachdel