

OSCAR PALACIO

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A master at revealing visual and cultural incongruities hiding in plain sight, Colombian-born artist Oscar Palacio describes the act of photographing as a way to orient himself within an alien cultural and social framework. It is this ambiguous role of resident outsider that enables him to see what familiarity renders invisible for most of us.

With his first series, *Unfamiliar Territory*, Palacio captured the homely details and moldering fragments of ordinary surroundings, while investing them with a hushed sense of mystery and oblique significance. Navigating city streets and suburban sidewalks, he focused on the uncanny borderlands where constructed objects meet and awkwardly abut natural surroundings. Fences and other barriers and boundaries figure strongly in these images, revealing a constant push and pull between the natural world and human efforts to resist and control it. Palacio uncovered the odd humor and poignant beauty in many of these doomed and quixotic attempts at division and control. In other images depicting artificial garden displays, AstroTurf, and faux stone, he also explored the provisional ways we screen out nature while paradoxically adopting more orderly, manufactured facsimiles of it.

With the series *History Re-visited*, Palacio continues his interest in quizzical human constructions seemingly plopped atop "natural" patches of American landscape. In these images his focus shifts from the humble and everyday to a more formal, public arena. In his new photographs of historic sites and monuments, Palacio moves beyond the subject of staking out individual turf to address the more complex matter of the fostering and maintaining of a national identity.

While photographing such iconic places as Plymouth Rock, Hoover Dam, and, most recently,

Gettysburg National Military Park and Underground Railroad sites, Palacio considers the function of these revered memorials: What narratives do they posit and perpetuate? Who or what is celebrated or excluded at such sites? In pondering these questions—particularly the last—Palacio is struck by the parallels between these commemorative markers and photography itself. Neither a single monument (no matter how monumental) nor an individual photograph (no matter how graphic) can possibly convey an entire story. Both require the viewer to negotiate between what he or she knows and what viewpoint of the story is being represented—and privileged.

Conscious of these limitations, Palacio nevertheless sets out to create photographs that broaden what he feels are incomplete narratives. The resulting photographs transcend historical specificity and local particularity to communicate something more telling than the partial visual evidence that he finds before him.

In *Gettysburg Cannon*, a gigantic gun barrel aggressively confronts the viewer and serves as a reminder of the sometimes casual effacement and at other times ruthless obliteration of both human life and the natural world of which man has repeatedly proven himself capable. Life and nature remain mere gauzy backdrops to this seminal national narrative.

In another image, a broken fence situated within the Gettysburg forest represents a violation of established boundaries. Alternatively, the breach in the fence could be read as a dissolving of divisions, signifying reconciliation, re-union, or a newly re-opened passage to freedom. The quirky plastic tree stump in *Gettysburg, Stump* is an obvious reference to life cut short; in the background a nearby railroad references

the passage over or through a divide into a new existence or condition.

Nestled in a cemetery in upstate New York, Harriet Tubman's tombstone commemorates such a journey. This simple marker possesses a dignity and power equal to the officially-sanctioned monuments in places such as Gettysburg. A photograph of a sign guarding the Gettysburg Virginia Memorial provides an interesting contrast to the image of Tubman's grave. While the latter invites respectful entry into a contemplative, private space, the former assumes visitors' malicious intent and threatens them with punishment. Despite their differences, both sites engage human response. The pinecones placed atop Tubman's headstone suggest a sweet poignancy and humble tribute, while the Confederate flag and rock-weighted note left beside the Gettysburg sign counter its aggressive warning and challenge its authority.

These photographs suggest that history is an ongoing dialogue between past and present, between traditional interpretations of events and the emergence of alternative perspectives, between the keepers of the eternal flame and those who wonder what other fires are burning underground, just outside the frame.

Allison N. Kemmerer

Oscar Palacio lives and works in Boston, MA. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence Program in August 2008.

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Gettysburg Cannon, PA, from the series *History Re-visited*, 2008

All images are pigmented inkjet prints, 20 x 24"



Gettysburg Fence, PA, from the series History Re-visited, 2008



Gettysburg Stump, PA, from the series History Re-visited, 2008



Gettysburg Confederate Memorial, PA, from the series History Re-visited, 2008



UGRR, Harriet Tubman's Tombstone, Auburn, NY, from the series History Re-visited, 2008