REVIEW - 01 OCT 2010

Jef Geys

Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, USA

BY MIKE POWELL

Jef Geys, *Cadillac Square*, From the series 'Woodward Avenue', 2010. Colour photograph.

Detroit has a reputation for decay, in part because the city is consistently presented as decaying. Tourists hoist their cameras in awe to Michigan Central Station – 500,000 square feet of emptiness with a Beaux-Arts façade – but probably don't shoot the popular barbeque restaurant across the street (or acknowledge that the building, which isn't even city-owned, has actually been out of use for more than 20 years). This is reality, but reality is complicated in ways that often make for clunky narrative. Writer and photographer James D. Griffioen has called images like this 'ruin porn', though 'porn' suggests that they might be pleasurable to some, which they never are. They're sombre, reverent and designed to make us gasp – because whoever thought such a thing could happen in America?

It's true, there are abandoned buildings in Detroit. There are buildings being taken over by uncontested plant life. The city is sick. But the tenor of these images isn't just negative, it's grandiose – they're operas of hopelessness. Their dull repetition is one of the reasons why a project as gentle as Jef Geys' 'Woodward Avenue' (2010) was such a welcome contrast.

At the Belgian Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennale, Geys exhibited 'Quadra Medicinale', a photographic and textual inventory of wild plants collected by four of his friends in four different cities, highlighting their medicinal or otherwise usable qualities – an effort to invite people to get to know the natural space that exists in spite of the urbanity that dominates it. 'Woodward Avenue' – named for a street that runs from downtown Detroit to Saginaw, 30 miles north – is ostensibly a variation on the Venice presentation: a series of dried plants, scientific descriptions, photographs and maps of where the specimens were found, all collected by New York–based ethnobotanist Ina Vandebroek.

The look of the show was clean and cheap – the maps, for example, were printed out from Internet mapping applications such as Google and MapQuest. The exhibition offered viewers the tools to experience seeing life where we're used to seeing death. The 'Woodward Avenue' series was accompanied by two films documenting an ethnobotany workshop run by Dr. Vandebroek in Bolivia. Both the films and the plants focus on how these small, wild things – things on the side of the street that we rarely have occasion to notice – can help us if we bother to understand them. Even if every viewer doesn't become a healer, it's fine. In a city always portrayed as though it's undergoing some kind of slow-motion apocalypse, it's refreshing to see a narrative so minor and optimistic.

MIKE POWELL

Mike Powell lives in Brooklyn, USA, where he writes about music for Pitchfork.com and The Village Voice.
