A Moveable Feast: Shadows, reflections and possible worlds in the photography of Jordan Marklund
There is something incredibly intimate about the photography in this collection. Jordan invites his viewers to see the world through his eyes: A world that is often dirty and broken, yet infused with a glimmer of transcendence. His work focuses on everyday objects and imbues them with magical realism. The photographs in this collection offer a glimpse at worlds within worlds. One reality is layered upon another through shadows, reflections, and openings between contrasting spaces. Jordan’s photographs point to a defiance of traditional understanding of time and space, asking the viewer to see the possibility of the sacred, illogical, transcendent beauty housed within the profane, logical immanence of our everyday lives. On one level, time and space move according to plan: there is rust, graffiti, garbage, and a linear flow of time towards the future. On another level, time flows ceaselessly into the past, offering a nostalgic and surrealist view of the world. This double temporal flow into future and past, arrests the viewer in the present moment. We could call his style of work an optimistic misanthropy or perhaps a pessimistic wonder. In An Ideal Husband, Oscar Wilde states, “It takes great courage to see the world in all its tainted glory, and still to love it.” This is the gift of Jordan’s photography: a recognition of the world’s cruel decadence with a stubborn insistence to love it anyway.
Shadows

The three main motifs of this collection linger in a liminal world. Reified in the fixed photograph, they serve as metonymies for that which cannot be spoken or reified. Jordan’s work with shadows offers the presence of a person without that person’s physical body. At times unnerving, the shadow asks us to imagine that individual in a way that we cannot when they are fully given. We must meet the photograph half way, engage, and create the absent presence. We sense the person more in an atmospheric mood than in a bodily form. Silhouetted against a brick wall or broken pavement, the shadow allows the person to merge with the surrounding world. As Edgar Allan Poe’s famous Ushers literally merge with the house in which they live, the shadow is as much an individual person, as it is a quality of the environment. The shadow has been a recurring theme throughout mythology, religion, and even psychoanalysis.

In Jewish lore, Lilith, the first wife of Adam, is made at the same time as her husband and the two lived in equality. As society became increasingly patriarchal, Lilith fell into shadow, as the male rose to the pinnacle of subjectivity. By creating Eve from his own rib, Adam created an anti-subject that made his own subjectivity possible. The distinction, later taken up by Lacan, between light and dark, male and female, good and bad, black and white was born with Eve. As a woman equal to men, Lilith became an impossibility, a shadow, representing everything that was woman and not subservient. Defying the logic of the world in which we live, Lilith suggests the impossible, the unrecognizable, and the incomprehensible. In many ways Lilith is the shadow of womankind, she is the possibility of the impossible.

In German folklore, the doppelgänger is the shadow or the dark mirror of our self. Without their own shadow, the doppelgänger is an evil shadow of a person who prophesizes doom. Edgar Allan Poe refers to this phenomenon in his sonnet, “Silence”:

There are some qualities—some incorporate things,
That have a double life, which thus is made
A type of that twin entity which springs
From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.
There is a two-fold Silence—sea and shore—
Body and soul.
And in his fable, “The Shadow”, Hans Christian Anderson writes of a shadow who, freed from the fetters of its master, grows powerful and substantial as the master becomes an increasingly weak shade. The motif of the shadow is adapted by psychiatrist C.G. Jung, who posits the “shadow” as our unconscious desires. For Jung, the shadow is the compilation of all the things we do not allow into our persona. For the most part, this more primal aspect of our being lies at our feet, unnoticed, but in cases of extreme fatigue, stress, or intoxication, the shadow takes over. An archetypal aspect of the human psyche, the shadow is not simply an evil force, but contains powerful drives of creation, desire, and a connection to our sense of spirituality. To experience our own shadow, or that of the other, is to experience a primal creative or perhaps destructive force. In all of these representations of the shadow, a common theme is its defiance of our logical awareness. It demands us to see beyond our own boundaries and experience the world in a different, perhaps more uncomfortable, and certainly more mysterious way.
The second major theme of this collection is reflection. Many of Jordan’s photographs use glass, water, mirrors, or buildings to reflect objects not present in the photo. In these works, Jordan often contrasts a banal or even stark everyday world with a beautiful, stunning, almost unworldly reflection. The viewer is asked to look closely at the everyday and discover an ulterior reality. Reflections overflow the object with a visual excess rather than the void our imaginations must fill when we encounter shadows, these reflections also defy our logical comprehension of the world and as such, ask us to see the emergence of other possible worlds within our neat and tidy logical existence. Since as early as 50BC, the tale of Narcissus’ has told of a beautiful young man who spurns his admirers. Walking through the forest, young Narcissus catches a glimpse of himself in a pool of water and becomes captivated by his own reflection. Unable to recognize the reflection as a mere image without substance, he withers away before his own likeness, unable to turn away from the beauty. In psychology, this tale has come to exclusively moralize the danger of excessive self-love and self-involvement. But it also sets out the allure of reflections, of images that are not what our logical mind believes. The beauty of Van Gogh and Monet revolves around an ability to create a world of reflections. In their art, we see the world reflected back as if through swirling water.

Indeed, when Alice enters the land of Jabberwockys, walruses, and carpenters, it is by stepping through a mirror into an another reality. It is not a difficult leap to believe that a mirror may contain an alternate world, or that crystal balls and magic mirrors can see into the future. In Kabbalistic Judaism, it is traditional to cover the mirrors in a house of mourning because the deceased leave behind a void that attracts evil demons, who can only be seen in the mirrors. But of course, there is also the vanity that mirrors imply, which is considered uncouth in a time of mourning. The Romans believed that a broken mirror meant bad luck, as the mirror contained the soul of the person who looked in it and to break this meant to shatter one’s soul and remain soulless for the seven years it took for the body to rejuvenate itself. The idea that reflections hold our soul suggests that the reflection is not the objective, physical thing-in-itself, but rather the essence of the thing. It is as close as we can get to experiencing the interior nature of a thing. Dangerous, aesthetic objects that one could almost hold in the palm of the hand, the reflection is an embodiment of wonder. These photographs ask the viewer to look deeper and experience the wonder glimmering from within our daily existence.
The final motif that this collection highlights is that of other possible worlds, the likes of which are contained in shadows and reflections, as well as Jordan’s shots of contrasting mediums and horizons. A blue sky opening over a grey cityscape, or bright light bursting down in patches across a steely lake, offer an interplay of light and dark, of two or more possible worlds in one photograph. Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger has the famous thought experiment known as Schrödinger’s cat, in which a cat in a box is simultaneously considered both alive and dead. When the box is opened, the cat is observed as either one or the other but not both. Jordan’s possible worlds account for the moment when the cat is simultaneously both. These worlds are not simply the physical earth, but rather human interpretations and projections onto the world. Each of these photos allows us to entertain the possibilities of the world as reality and the world as magical. For example, consider the “world of the shaman” as opposed to the “world of the lumberjack”: In one world a tree is a living, breathing entity that bestows wisdom upon those who can speak its language and in the other world the tree is an object to be cut and chopped in exchange for monetary compensation. What makes Jordan’s possible worlds so fascinating is that he gives us both the world of the shaman and the world of the lumberjack, as it were: the sacred is nestled within the profane; wonder glimmers within the banality of our everyday existence.

Possible Worlds
The main motifs of this collection point to beauty and wonder as a moveable feast. In his reflections on his life as a young expat in Paris, Ernest Hemingway contends: “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.” In the midst of a lost generation, a post-war age that had lost all sense of meaning, Hemingway takes the notion of Easter as a moveable feast and places his new foundation, meaning, and raison d’être, as an urban center bustling with art, food, and creative comradery. In particular, the love he shares with his first wife, Hadley during his Parisian years becomes something he carries with him, a possibility. Just as Easter carries the promise of resurrection, of spring, and of new beginnings, Paris becomes a source of possibility and hope in Hemingway’s book. Similarly, Jordan’s photography carries wonder into places of pain and beauty into moments of sorrow. Wonder becomes a moveable feast inserted into the realism that his camera uncovers. While time marches on ceaselessly, Jordan’s works open a gateway to time’s continual backward glance and remind us that time moves not just in one direction, but is continually drawn into past, present, and future. As we pause before his work, we begin by being drawn into the future, the landscape of our world and our possible place in it, we are arrested by the mirrors, the reflection, the shadows, and find ourselves in the present moment, acknowledging the link between these possible worlds, and finally, these motifs capture us and “we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

It is my hope that the viewer allows these works to open organically, to linger in each temporal direction and to exist as both raw profane life and transcendent beauty.
Notes

1 Lilith was recognized as early as 700CE with the Alphabet of Ben-Sira: “When God created the first man Adam alone, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” [So] God created a woman for him, from the earth like him, and called her Lilith. They [Adam and Lilith] promptly began to argue with each other: She said, “I will not lie below,” and he said, “I will not lie below, but above, since you are fit for being below and I for being above.” She said to him, “The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth.” And they would not listen to each other. Since Lilith saw [how it was], she uttered God's ineffable name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Maker and said, “Master of the Universe, the woman you gave me fled from me!”’’ See: Jewish Women's Archive, ”Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith,” (Viewed on July 15, 2017) <https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith>.

2 In the 13th-century writings of Isaac ben Jacob ha-Cohen, Lilith left Adam after she refused to become subservient to him. She then partners with the Archangel Samael and refuses to return to Eden. See: Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen, “The Treatise on the Left Emanation,” in The Early Kabbalah, ed. Joseph Dans, trans. Ronald C. Kiener, 244-264 (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

3 The term Lilith first occurs in a list of animals in Isaiah 34:14 and is translated as "night creatures", (The Complete Jewish Bible)"night monster" (American Standard Version of the Holy Bible), "night hag"(Revised Standard Version Bible), or "screech owl"(King James Bible, 21st Century version).


6 See Carl G Jung, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9 Part II: Aion Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self, ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R.F.C Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 423. ‘‘If it has been believed hitherto that the human shadow was the source of all evil, it can now be ascertained on closer investigation that the unconscious man, that is, his shadow, does not consist only of morally reprehensible tendencies, but also displays a number of good qualities, such as normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, creative impulses, etc.”


8 For example, Vincent Van Gogh, Starry Night Over the Rhône, oil on canvas (Paris: Musee D’Orsay, 1888). Beyond his work that deals directly with reflections, Van Gogh also paints the logical everyday world as if it were a reflection.

9 For example, his series of the Houses of Parliament in London or his water lilies. See: Claude Monet, Le Parlement de Londres, soleil couchant, oil on canvas (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1903).


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