



When The Gods Have Been Done (2024) - Merve Kiliçer

A Frame to Feel: out of sight, out of mind Anastasia Shin

I ease into the double doored space of puntWG, Amsterdam, joining the first images, mentally resting on a bed of daisies. On the surrounding walls these flowers-on-a-lawn repeat, in a recognisable grassy, summer scene. They are greyscale, larger than life, setting a backdrop for the colourful digital and screen printed works, magnetically pinned, hovering on top.

I'm primed by the title, *out of sight, out of mind*, as I enter artists' Merve Kiliçer and Jake Caleb's duo show. I start feeling through the exhibition's sense of provocation, layered with the lightness of the stated aphorism, a kind of survival-through-denial. The cacophony of images I've scrolled into and out of, on the tram here, makes me question the timescale of the title's phrase. How long a metaphorical sightline do we cast into the past when the media of life's events overwrite and imprint on us infinitely?

Above the greyscale daisy layer, the top images are inverted. In one, kids in chequered and stripey shirts appear with blueish black skin, and orangey-red clothing that must have actually been greeny-purple. Their bodies bundle together, their faces hiding amidst arms held up like snouts, in front of a leafy print sofa which contributes to the tumble of pattern. A man looks on, curiously neutral, but it's hard to read the side of his face. In other blown up negatives of the same sort: hands hide a face, a "Big Beach Towel" proclaims its important adjectives in text on its surface (and the likely, holiday, context), and a parental duo lean in wearing animal masks.

Then, the words of the poster-like prints drift cursive serif font phrases of poetry across their surface and into my thoughts: *While we - the ones who bore witness to loss - cannot comprehend why things continue unsaid.*

These are Jake Caleb's recent works, made in the wake of Covid-19 and his father's death, contemplating the poignancy of grief and the banality of an everyday collective denial that may allow us to function, but not to feel. These images, kept in their archival negative format, yet stretched beyond the intimate scale of the photo envelope's sleeve, are displayed on the wall for multiple eyes at once.

The expectation of the image's function here, as archive, as memory, as memento—in the context of *out of sight, out of mind*—has shifted, resurrected from the family archive and yet also converted. The works are coarser, louder, and more public than a home-bound album. In a sense forced into view, back into conscious processing perhaps.

Yet, what is there to process or understand here? How do we engage with another's personal grief, through their work in this contained image-based format? Caleb's work is set against the administrative backbone of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry; a zine contributes the inquiry's transcript to the context of our reading as well as further poems by the artist. One poem in particular, *Wishing Well*, describes the physicality of his father's death and cuts angrily through some supposed rationale of the political decisions made, which broadens the experience into a sense of political grief as much as the personal:

Wishing Well

*He drowned in his own lungs
It happened fast reflecting
A surface of pacing impatience To draw yields for the market
One eye on the horizons One counting wishes below.*

[...]

As I look up out of the zine pages into the exhibition space, I have to shake myself straight to be able to take any more in. I'm reminded of an old John Berger essay I revisited recently, about the agony of images – or rather, *Photographs of Agony...* In it, he thinks through the (then recent) normalisation of the publication of 'shocking images' and the different facets of emotional response felt when engaging with images of suffering, including the feeling of insufficiency that follows in disengaging. I feel something similar after reading Caleb's poem. A painful powerlessness.

Berger questioned if the reason newspapers were more freely printing images of horror was because of an everyday ambivalence on the part of the reader, or a will to know the truth. His thoughts were guided towards the Vietnam war imagery being published in English newspapers when America was bombing Vietnam 53 years ago:

Many people would argue that such photographs remind us shockingly of the reality, the lived reality, behind the abstractions of political theory, casualty statistics or news bulletins. Such photographs, they might go on to say, are printed on the black curtain which is drawn across what we choose to forget or refuse to know. [1]

The images used in this duo show are not ones of agony in the above sense, but they have a sense of questioning the dynamic of how we engage with suffering and injustices and over what timescale: i.e., what we care for, pay attention to, and act on. In the exhibition, the 'black curtain' is drawn back. There is a negation of that which is: *out of sight, out of mind* as things are brought into sight, into mind.

This is the immediate relation you are drawn into with Merve Kiliçer's work. Behind the bed of daisies, Kiliçer's portal-like wall



without start without end (2024) - Jake Caleb

drawing, in thin, terracotta lines, depicts an architectural entrance with two lions positioned in protection on either side, framing an equally symmetrical set up of step-like plinths. This invites you towards the top level plinth where there is a photo album, of the two page, multiple column kind.

In the open spread of the photo album, horizontal slithers of images join to create two vast black and white landscapes, each fragment contributing to the wholeness of each image. One side shows a shrine and the other a mining site next to a concrete factory.

Kılıçer's installation faces a political and ecological grief for a place, and a way of living in Western Central Anatolia. Set within the Aegean region of Turkey, including the Akbelen Forest, this once densely forested area has been heavily affected by the commercial exploitation of resources. Kılıçer's work, too, is set against an administrative backdrop of court cases and ideological clashes of what we should value. Again, the 'yields of the market' threaten existence. A protest banner proclaiming 'people over profit' could be used for both Caleb and Kılıçer's works.

Flipping open and across the four columns of photographs leads us through individual images of, and various stories from, this geographical area, tracing the artist's journey to active mining sites for coal, gold and limestone as well as the remains of shrines built for Cybele, the archaic goddess of Anatolia. The photographs are physically backed by further transcript; taken from the interviews Kılıçer has conducted along the route.

Reading about the collective resistance through the transcript, we navigate the fragments presented in the album hearing of small wins and big losses. Licences are issued, land is sold off, we feel the clash of community vs commerce, and in the end, the forceful eradication of the possibility to live with and from the land, as trees become barren, and waterways are re-routed or extinguished.

The goddess Cybele was believed to maintain the balance between wildlife and human settlements. Her shrines were positioned at the peaks and slopes of mountains to express the unreachable power of the divine, so the transition from worshipping the land to its commodification mirrors the spiritual loss of harmony between wildlife and human life that she represented. It is this idea, this possibility, as well as the physical habitat, that people have been fighting for. The assault on their way of life, and the continued struggle with those who hold political power, mean the 'assumptive world' of these villagers (the reliance, balance and dependance on the surrounding nature they thought possible) crumbles. This is part of how political grief is defined:

The concept of political grief can be seen as a poignant sense of assault to the assumptive world of those who struggle with the ideology and practices of their governing bodies and those who hold political power. [2]



When The Gods Have Been Done (2024) detail - Merve Kılıçer



without start without end (2024) detail - Jake Caleb

Merve Kılıçer's work, and indeed the journey she made which traces the scars across the landscape, is a kind of pilgrimage, led by an affinity with this political grief and a renewed dedication and revival of Cybelian values.

Upstairs, Kılıçer's film installation gives the journey more body. On the mezzanine within the exhibition space her 16mm film is projected onto a sculptural screen made from porcelain slip cast loofah. Echoing the album downstairs: we see cut down trees, beautifully engraved stone, archaeological sites, portraits of people, landscape decimated by mining and extraction, waterways, olive trees, protest banners, and industry. The light of the projection dances on and through the flattened loofah pieces, creating a shimmering grid on the wall behind, and from the back, there's an abstract glow which pulses like embers. As I watch, the projections incessant *clack-clack-clack* cuts through the air dispelling any whimsy; keeping us firmly in the material reality of an analogue archive.

Instantly refreshed news feeds seem to require instant judgement, when the truth and feeling of a matter often requires latency, not-knowing, re-visiting and longer investment of understanding. The contemplative, sensitive arrangements which Kılıçer and Caleb have set up at puntWG, are both a response to a type of loss which encourages a slow but transformative process: channelling political grief into the desire for justice.

The works carry this desire next to a weighty remembrance, guided by their specific, situated knowledge, they serve as a poignant record and an invested reopening of the inquiry which shifts to a register beyond the personal: What happened here? And still, what more can be done?

References:

1. Berger, John, Photographs of Agony, About Looking, London, p37-40, 1980.
2. Harris, Darcy, Political Grief, April 2021. *Illness Crisis & Loss* 30 (1).

The exhibition *out of sight, out of mind* took place at puntWG, Amsterdam from 9 Nov - 1 Dec 2024.

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