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LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

THE TRUTHS WE DO NOT KNOW

By Megan N. Liberty



TEJU COLE'S LATEST PROJECT is one of contradictions: between form and content; word and image; seen and unseen; known and unknown. At base level, *Blind Spot* is a collection of photographs and texts with corresponding locations: a "project" because it has multiple iterations, only one of which is bound and paginated. (Other presentations take the form of gallery exhibition and social media stream.) The hardcover tome, with few exceptions, presents images on the right and text on the left: not captions, but free-associative prose providing nuanced visual and metaphorical context, or tied to the location by historic figures or events.

For example, "In the spring of 1507, Albrecht Dürer returned from his second trip to Italy," Cole explains. "He had seen Leonardo's oil sketches, and been impressed by their use of drapery to suggest form, movement, wind, and light." The accompanying photograph depicts sheer white curtains pulled closed against a balcony. The location is Nuremberg, near Dürer's house, and Cole concludes, "I saw, about eight minutes after they began their stellar journey, some several rays of the sun describing the folds on the curtains of my hotel room." In this way, Cole links place, person, and photo through the interplay of light and drapery. As with this picture, the photos in the book are often devoid of people, marked by stark lighting, and slightly grainy. Visual and verbal motifs run throughout: cars, plastic coverings and curtains hung against the light from windows, slits, and openings, Biblical references, chimeras, and signs ebb and flow between the images and texts, slowly building a continuity that takes dozens of pages to establish.

Several of the pictures from *Blind Spot* have appeared on Cole's Instagram feed with varying texts, forming a rough draft of sorts for the project. Instagram offers the option to tag locations, but Cole has opted to use the place name as part of his text. Likewise, rather than rely on the automatic date of posting, he assigns his own dates to each image, as if to highlight the time between capture and share. On January 14, 2016, Cole posted a photo of the inside of a hotel room from Zürich dated July 2015. Below it, he wrote: "Peregrination. The hours as they present themselves. Hotel desks in hotel rooms in every time zone. I've had to learn and learned to like how to work far away from home."

Further on there's a meditation on hotel rooms, but much lengthier, and haunted by the shadow of violence and terrorism: "The point is to shatter serenity; the absurdity of contrast between before and after is the very point." This photo shows no hint of violence, yet in each case, on Instagram and in the book, the text betrays a quality unseen. The shift in tone from one to the other suggests the malleability of images, reseen when placed beside different words.

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Author of fiction, criticism, and The New York Times Magazine column “On Photography,” Cole’s thinking exists between media, suited to our age of interdisciplinary hybridity. “The photographs in this book have little to do with the glossy and gorgeous scenic images that weigh down coffee tables all over the world,” notes Siri Hustvedt in the foreword, “They are not idealized ‘art’ photos either.” It’s true: Cole’s photos are not arty or especially inviting, nor are they of recognizable locations or landmarks. Though travel is an essential component of the project, the effect is neither documentary (though it documents) nor illustrative (though it illustrates). Take a picture of cars in a parking lot, and the accompanying text: “I have always been haunted by this sense of the migratory property of works,” writes Cole, hinting at the way themes flow throughout the various forms in which he works. He continues: “I can distinguish between my practices, but that doesn’t mean they are distinct.” In a postscript to the book, he expands on its creation: “The process, I found, was not so different from one of composing a novel: I made use of voices, repetitions (within the text, and from other things I have written) [...] It can also be seen as the fourth in a quartet of books about the limits of vision.” As noted, these visual and verbal pairings don’t conform to our expectations: not within the realms of the book or the gallery. But if we consider Blind Spot part of Cole’s larger endeavor to explore the boundaries of sight, does the project shed light on the tension between its forms? Is there a way in which that tension allows him — and us — to see anew?

Unlike Instagram’s option to view images in grid form sans captions, the book is diachronic, requiring temporal progression — the turning of pages — each spread containing a single image and single text. Though Cole includes locations, he’s removed all dates, preventing the effect of a travel log and allowing the ebb and flow of motifs to create connections. Consider the sheer number of photographs with cars. The most noticeable, taken in Brooklyn, shows a white minivan beneath an old sign printed with a car icon and “CARS” in bold letters. In the companion text Cole writes: “One of the common uses of the word ‘shadow’ was as a synonym for ‘photograph,’” referring to Sojourner Truth’s famous claim, I sell the shadow to support the substance. “Here is a shadow above,” he explains, “clearly labeled, and enmeshed below it, the substance (which, less shadowed, looks slightly less real).” The next spread depicts a Volkswagen parked outside the Church of Saint Sebaldus in Nuremberg. Cole’s opening lines read: “They are ever with us, the cars. We live and die with them, they give us joy. The three photographs before this one feature or allude to crosses.”

I first misread “crosses” for “cars” and quickly flipped back to the previous photo (regarding shadows and cars), and to the one before that, taken in Lagos, of a tree with sheet metal piled around it. In the bottom right corner is the edge of a car. The image before that includes no cars at all, leading me to realize my error. Certainly Cole did not intend for the misreading of his text. But his line does demand relooking, encouraging us to turn back to the previous images. Throughout the book he requires us to look, then look again. Another recurring reference is the chimera, “creature of legend whose hind parts were a dragon, the middle parts a goat, and the fore parts a lion,” a merging of animals impossible in reality. Sometimes, we too see things impossible in reality. As Cole notes, [I]n certain heightened states in certain individuals, the boundary between the chimeras seen in dreams and the discrete forms of waking life begin to blur. In these sudden rifts in the natural order of time, prodigies of vision in the guise of hybrid forms can appear briefly, before the critical faculty intervenes and the world rights itself again.

Like the mirage chimeras of dreams, Cole’s visual-verbal play attempts to show us impossible realities. Like the shadows and chimera he references, his texts haunt his images. And like his observation that at times the “shadow” or image of a thing seems more real than the thing itself, his words and pictures play off each other until they are so linked we can no longer determine which is dominant. Returning to the string of cars: Following the Volkswagen text is one dealing with hidden histories, coupled with an image of a shed containing something covered. To me, as I try to see what cannot be seen, it looks like a car.

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Thirty-two pairings from *Blind Spot* were recently exhibited at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York in black two-panel frames with text on the right, images on the left. Not only had the dates been returned to the titles — the order differed from that in the book and on social media, precluding the same kinds of visual-verbal threads. In the book, Cole has sequenced the images in such a way as to create expectation and meaning with visual motifs. But if, on the page or screen, we are forced to experience the images in succession, in a gallery the sequencing is less effective. For instance, one wall in the show includes a selection of photographs of people's backs. The connection between the images is immediately visible, and the subtlety of the interplay between image and text is lost. Such are the requirements of a gallery exhibition — but these are not capital-A art photographs. Notwithstanding Cole's skills, experience, and credentials, enlarged on the wall these images fail to fill the space.

In the book, Cole recounts spotting some men selling fake bags in Rome grab their contraband and evade police. The image alongside the text shows unattended bags on the street in Venice. Again, the tension between the image and the text forces us to rethink assumptions of how words and pictures interact. Elsewhere Cole has wondered, "What work are the words in this book doing? These words are excessive, the way a dancer must be excessive, must always give a little more than is necessary." His words incomplete the picture, providing just enough excess to raise more questions than they answer. But in the exhibition, forced into a secondary role, the texts are unable to provide the necessary excess. Instead they feel almost gratuitous.

Describing the flight of the bags salesmen in Rome, Cole quotes poet Seamus Heaney, who wrote about "a hurry through which known and strange things pass." *Known and Strange Things* is also the title of Cole's essay collection, published last year. In the final essay, presciently titled "Blind Spot," he details the temporary but recurring loss of vision in his left eye, caused by papillophlebitis — exploding blood vessels in his retina. He goes on to connect his temporary loss of vision with the preoccupations of his work across the board, the limits of sight and knowledge, themes *Blind Spot* continues to investigate most successfully in book form, where the writing and the photographs have equal weight. As his temporary loss of sight forever changed his own way of seeing, Cole's juxtapositions of form and content — words and pictures — make us freshly see the genres, places, and everyday occurrences we thought we knew. "We hope, through the spooky art of writing," he tells us in *Known and Strange Things*, "to trick ourselves into divulging truths that we do not know we know." The places Cole shows us cannot be known through his photos alone; after all, he is not interested in the literal seeing of these places, but rather in sight as a way of knowing, of forcing us to unsee, unknow, and know again.