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Hallowed halls: abandoned schools of Louisiana

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HALLOWED HALLS:
ABANDONED SCHOOLS OF LOUISIANA

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ABSTRACT

“Hallowed Halls: Abandoned Schools of Louisiana” is an exploration of the remnants found in vacant educational institutions around the state. With the use of color and black and white images, I deal with my own memories of grade school by recreating the vibrancy and color I remember with the poignancy of those things and places that remain. These objects and spaces speak of an interaction with society and emit a history of the complex relationship between people, and the places and things that were once a part of their lives. The images are meant to suggest a contrast between what were once bustling hallways and cafeterias and the now eerily and empty spaces that are coated with sickening layers of dust and mildew.

The black and white and color images are not meant to juxtapose each other, but to coexist, fill in where the other cannot. The color images remind the viewer of the vibrancy these schools once had; bright colored lunch trays, orange desk chairs, green chalkboards and the roll down maps where each continent is defined by its own bold hue. The black and white images suggest the more desolate side of abandonment. The monochromatic palette depicts the more institutional feel of each environment and the images become less nostalgic but more disturbing. They remind the viewer that though these were once lively places for children to grow and learn, they now contain only remnants of their past.
HALLOWED HALLS: ABANDONED SCHOOLS OF LOUISIANA

Dilapidated classrooms, chalkboards with their last lessons visible in dusty white smudges, vacant chairs haphazardly arranged, books and globes left behind to teach no one in empty classrooms. These spaces and tools, which I associate with giddy youths and aspiring minds, have been left to collect the dust of time in a place where time was infamous for moving unhurriedly. These are the remnants of what were once active educational facilities and have, over time, fallen into the depths of abandonment. The schools are left with hollow lockers, bookless libraries and childless classrooms and the smell of grease still hangs thick in the air of the lunchrooms. The photographs in “Hallowed Halls: Abandoned Schools of Louisiana” are an exploration of the remnants in these institutions which no longer serve their civic duty of educating the young public.

The images are meant to suggest a contrast between what were once bustling hallways and cafeterias and the now eerily and empty spaces that are coated with sickening layers of mildew and mold. A Wilson football left in a checkered foyer of a school in New Orleans and a model universe, of which earth, the moon and sun are the only survivors, are sad and poignant reminders of former lives. The photographic work accentuates the institutional hopelessness that haunts these schools. Some images resemble crime scene photographs with their innuendos and vacancies; some portray a loss of innocence, while others tug at the nostalgic strings of our childhood experiences in elementary and high school.

I find my attention and camera drawn to the exploration of desolate places and their remaining artifacts. These objects speak of some interaction with society and emit a history of the complex relationship between people, and the places and things that were once a part of their lives. An exploration of the human imprint that remains at these schools is both adventurous and fascinating. Searching through the rubble like an archeologist dusts the bones of ancient creatures, the discovering of the scenes are as much about the looking as it is about the photographing. Looking for those things which trigger the memory of listening to someone over the loudspeaker recite the Pledge
Allegiance each morning or the personalized carvings on what seemed like every desk in every classroom.

My own schooling, since I can remember, has been filled with eager first days, dressed in the favorites of my newly purchased wardrobe, still with their factory creases, excited for their debut. The plastic trays that segregated my brochette boat from my tater tots at lunchtime and the array of vibrant colored plastic chairs in each classroom are fond memories. As I prepare to finish my terminal degree and leave school after 22 years, I have begun to think of how formative my time in the classroom has been. I remember every teacher and can visualize every classroom, including the two gerbils in Ms. Brown’s third grade class. This work represents in many ways my own metaphorical abandonment of school. My photographs illustrate that abandonment and express my feelings of nostalgia for what I remember most fondly from those years.

Though showing black and white images alongside color in the same project is somewhat unorthodox, I feel in this case they compliment each other. The color images have the ability to remind the viewer of the vibrancy these schools once had. Bright colored lunch trays, orange desk chairs, green chalkboards and the roll down maps where each continent is defined by its own bold hue. The black and white images suggest the more desolate side of abandonment. The monochromatic palette depicts the more institutional feel of each environment and the images become less wistful but more disturbing. They remind the viewer that though these were once bustling places for children to grow and learn, they now contain only remnants of that past: a child’s jacket laying plastered in leaves and rotting in front of a classroom door, a trophy once held in the hands of a young basketball star now sits in a heap of rusted dreams.

The schools are from different areas and tell different as well as similar stories. For some of these schools, a state of the art educational facility lies only a few hundred yards away. Other buildings have been tattered by Katrina’s onslaught and a few have simply been too small to teach too many. The reasons for these schools’ closures are not entirely relevant to the thesis work but are interesting nonetheless. For whatever reason,
these structures have ceased to exist as they were intended and left behind are scattered historical vignettes. The schools are adorned with lockers that have long held the books and accessories of young aspiring minds, coat racks are still labeled with children’s names on stickers, doors are tattooed with classroom numbers and decorated with their corresponding teachers’ name. Dusty wooden floors where throngs of children once shuffled their feet from classroom to classroom are now left to warp and rot and halls once filled with the voices and giggling of students are hollow.

LaBarre Elementary is a small school in Point Coupee parish. Across a grassy field, the new Point Coupee Central High shadows over the one story former elementary school. The color-coded classrooms are vibrant but eerily empty of desks, chairs and chalkboards. The facility closed a little over a year ago because of bankruptcy issues with the school board. Its students have now scattered to other schools and LaBarre has become a storage space for not only the school board, but also the local ROTC.

Morganza High School became a safe haven during hurricane Katrina for those fleeing New Orleans. The school is filled with low hung, black chalkboards which angle downward towards the empty classrooms. Walnut moldings frame the windows and doorways and, as I roamed the three floors beeps of waning smoke detectors echoed down the halls. The school closed for the same reasons as LaBarre and most its former students now attend Point Coupee Central.

Lawless High School is tucked away in the 9th Ward of New Orleans. Near the levy, the school was a sponge to Katrina and the auditorium and gymnasium are covered in a thick layer of cracked clay. The curtains of the library venture out from broken window frames. A fine layer of white dust covers the weather-warped books and one, splayed open to the history of New Orleans Jazz, lies portentously on the ground. A Doritos vending machine sits alone at the end of a hall, waiting attentively in a pile of water and insulation. When I returned to Lawless in March, bulldozers and dump trucks were working to rid the frame of these artifacts.

Louis Armstrong Elementary suffered a similar plight. Also located in the 9th Ward, the
water line reached over half way up the wall of the first floor. The upper floors showed signs that no one had returned. Teachers’ desks were still filled with post-its, sharpies and highlighters and a red blazer still hung in the office of the school’s principal. The library still held it’s entire set of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Freyhan High School in St. Francisville was the first public school in the parish. Built in 1909 with a donation from Julius Freyhan, a German Jewish immigrant, the brick school was built overlooking the Mississippi River and it’s wood floors and stage spoke loudly under the pressure of my rubber soles. The parish is currently raising money to renovate the building in hopes of bringing it back to life. Plastic chairs sit stacked at the bottom of the staircase: in bright orange, blue and yellow, their colors are vibrant against the dark backdrop of the wooden steps.

The John Dawson School is an African American elementary on the outskirts of St. Francisville on La. 66. Stalagmites formed from some curious ingredient hang from the ceilings of rooms and drip their concoction onto the floor. Most of the roof has caved in from the pressures of debris and age. The north side of the school has fallen off into the stream below, opening the classrooms to a staggering view of a wooded landscape. The site is littered with wheel chairs, rollaway beds and a thick layer of vegetation covers the floors. To maneuver through the rubble one must pay attention to what threatens from above and below.

There is something infinitely human about recording the things we leave behind, turn away from or forget. I find myself drawn to examining the vestiges of humanity that linger in forgotten places. It is not merely the abandonment I am responding to or the structures themselves, but it is the items left behind in those structures that I find so intriguing. The empty desks with empty chairs, cafeterias, libraries and locker lined hallways all trigger memories and feelings from my years spent in classrooms. The schools of my past have been consecrated in my mind as places of growth and future. Though the schools I photograph have not grown since their closures and have uncertain futures, what is left behind tells a much more significant story.
IMAGES

Figure 1: Jacket, John Dawson School, St. Francisville

Figure 2: Gymnasium, Lawless High School, New Orleans
Figure 3: Trophy, Louis Armstrong Elementary, New Orleans

Figure 4: Wilson Football, William Frantz Elementary, New Orleans
Figure 5: Scrawlings, LaBarre Elementary, St. Francisville

Figure 6: Hangers, Morganza High School, Morganza
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Figure 18: Pooh Stickers, Morganza High School, Morganza
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Figure 20: Chairs in Stairwell, Freyhan High School, St. Francisville
Lauren Quincy Greathouse was born to Loyann Francis Smith and Alan Albert Greathouse at Seattle’s Group Health Hospital in 1979. Alongside her older brother, she grew up in a small suburb of Seattle by the name of Lake Forest Park. She spent most her childhood with skinned knees and a penchant for climbing trees. After attending Shorecrest High School, she chose the furthest university from home while still being able to pay in state tuition; Washington State University. On receiving her Bachelor of English and Bachelor of Fine Art in photography, Lauren found herself uninterested in entering the real world. So, after a six-month stint at Starbucks, she returned to the industry of education to earn her Master of Fine Arts in photography at Louisiana State University. She resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with her weimeraner/german shorthaired pointer, Basil.