

The Claustrophobic Sublime

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What is the disorder that is being alluded to in Liat Elbling's series *Proposals for Disorder*? After all, at first glance everything looks so neat: smooth walls, shiny floor, uniform light, geometric shapes. There are no extraneous objects in the empty rooms; everything appears organized, clean and empty. Perhaps this is what a house looks like with a level of life shaved off from it, covering up the ravages of time, erasing every sign of use. What could have said "home," the place that could have accumulated memories and provided shelter, is as if cleared of any connection to human life. There is no movement and no disorder.

Is this place, the photographed space, a dead place? Is there really no movement in it? But what does the light do if not move, touching the objects, turning the sterile surfaces into radiant ones? There is something Caravaggesque, religious, revelatory in light. The photograph has an aura. It contains hints of a home but also of a temple, a mausoleum, perhaps even a grave, or one of those spaces that is gradually revealed by light: the church space and the gallery space. Regarding the content, the photograph deals with space, architecture and solid form. From the point of view of the aura, or emotional resonance, the light carves the form out of the darkness like a sculptor extracting a sculpture from a block of stone. The architecture is a kind of "excuse" for the rhythms of light and shadow: the soft dispersion in the vaults, a sharp cut in the corners, a dim echo on the far wall, zigzagging on the stairs—light enlivens the world. The architecture becomes a revelation; the space is alive! Not the material life of people in homes but the abstract life of observation, of contemplative revelation, of dreaming thought. The photograph, whether as a three-dimensional space or a two-dimensional surface, is a device that triggers daydreaming, an open question.

This is the point! We look for an answer in the photograph, as if the photograph knows the secret: What is the meaning of this place? But in fact, not only is there no answer in the photograph, it is itself the question: Where is this place? What is its purpose? What is beyond the round window? Where do the stairs lead? What is hiding around the corner? What is the secret? In the photograph, there is the revelation of the dark sublime, the hidden, that is deceptively cold yet intimate, a monumental miniature. The homey combines with the uncanny, the familiar meets the stranger. Claustrophobia mixed with a measure of "claustrophilia": the closed world opens; cozy habitable space merges with warped, open-closed cosmic space.

The architecture infers an indecipherable functionality. Why is the door so near to the corner? Why does the back room look so compressed? The main function of the space is its efficiency as a secret code and generator of thoughts, thoughts that attempt to be introspective and think of the space that birthed them: what is this house we were born into, ask the thoughts at night. What do we hide and from whom? The dreams build mysterious structures, shelters and hiding places, and at the same time, the dream's thoughts hover, with no steady direction. Thought travels through time, revealing the hidden archaeology of the structure. There in the ancient strata of the photograph is Dürer's *Melancholia* alongside Piranesi's prisons, the deserted streets of De Chirico and the boxes of alchemical wonders of Joseph Cornell. The bare church interiors of the Dutchman Saenredam, the silent hotel rooms of Edward Hopper, the white cells of Absalon—all are in the background of Liat Elbling's interior

images. And perhaps we will go back in time to the Etruscan caves, to secret rooms in the Pyramids, to prehistoric dolmens and menhirs. The architecture is a dream. The room expands, the space breathes, the material dissipates, the soul merges with the universe.

I've gotten carried away, haven't I? I was daydreaming.

Ten years ago, Liat Elbling took a series of photographs (Untitled, 2008-2012) of buildings without openings, suburban Bneh Beitkha (Build Your Home) homes whose windows and doors were erased with Photoshop. With the doors and windows sealed, the functionality of the structure was obliterated, the signs of life were gone. Anything that could have signified a home or life was replaced by a succession of fortified walls. The home became a kind of prison, or an impenetrable black box. The soul is a monad, an internalization that has no contact with the outside. These photographs, with their external perspective, anticipate the later photographs of the interior space. Indeed, in the photo series Common Ground that followed it, but preceded Proposals for Disorder, the gaze is trapped in an interior that has no way out. The windows and doors, instead of facing outward, face progressively inward. On the walls are photographs of a room, like an endless reflection in a mirror. A representation of a representation of the exhibition space. The monolithic box has become a labyrinth. This is the complementary gaze, the Siamese twin of the outward gaze. From outside, the interior appears opaque, claustrophobic, uninviting, but from inside it also has a revelatory and seductively intimate quality—not the intimacy of touching but of dreaming. Something is happening in these empty rooms, something is going on, a kind of quiet magic—not the wonder of open spaces, but a gradual epiphany of an inner world, a world of reflections and daydreams.