Railroad Station, Janov, 1996, digital print, 24" x 30"

Portrait of Lenin, Kindergarten, Pripyat, 1997, digital print, 24" x 30"

School Classroom, Pripyat, 2002, digital print, 44''x 54''

View of Forest, Dental Hospital, Pripyat, 2012, digital print, 36" x 44"

Tree in Hotel Room, Pripyat, 2004, digital print, 36" x 44"

Metal Fabricating Facility, Pripyat, 2013, digital print, 36''x44''

View of the Nuclear Power Plant, 1994, digital print, 16''x20''

AGSM

EXCLUSION ZONE
DAVID McMILLAN

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA
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ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA
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DAVID McMILLAN

David McMillan was born in Scotland, educated in the United States, and in 1973 came to Winnipeg to teach at the University of Manitoba. His background is in painting but he became interested in photography, which led him to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The work has been shown in a number of domestic and international venues, including Iceland, China, and Australia. In 2012, the photographs were included in the Helsinki Photography Biennial and later this year, a selection will be in the National Gallery's Biennial, in Ottawa.

David McMillan has been traveling to Chernobyl and Pripyat, Ukraine, since 1994 to photograph the 30-kilometre Exclusion Zone around the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant after a reactor meltdown in 1986 left the city uninhabitable. Initially, I was drawn to McMillan's work on a personal level as a Russian immigrant born and raised in Moscow on the cusp of the collapsing Soviet Union. I wanted to locate my own past in his photographs of vacated Soviet schools, hospitals, swimming pools, and parks. The disaster happened only a year after my birth, and the Soviet Union ceased to exist just as I began school, so what I know of life in Soviet times seems both foreign and familiar. There is a gap in which the absence of my memories as a child coincides with the dissolution of the country where I was born; it was the exact moment in time when the city of Pripyat was abandoned.

McMillan's images of the cities and villages around Chernobyl make the flow of time visible, letting it fall naturally into the processes of recollection and memory. They stage an encounter with the city in a way that both opens it to imaginative projection, while insisting on the particularity of place and the course of growth and reclamation. There is an invisible force in the images, the release which has rendered the city toxic and now shields it from settlement. Perversely, species of birds and animals that have been considered extinct in Europe for decades are returning to the Zone. However, the presence of radiation hovers over them, forcefully asserting how something so seemingly thriving can also refuse settlement and habitation.

The fire at the fourth reactor of the nuclear power station happened on the evening of April 26, 1986. An unapproved safety test went wrong, leading to the reactor overheating and exploding with a release in radiation to rival 200 Hiroshima and Nagasaki explosions. The fire crews called to the site were not aware of the extent of the damage and danger of radiation, and all perished within two weeks from acute radiation poisoning. The city of Pripyat, where most nuclear plant workers lived, was not evacuated for thirty-six hours and no news of the disaster spread until the following week. As the fire burned, families poured onto balconies and rooftops to watch the bluish glow around the reactor. They watched from the same vantage points from where McMillan photographs aerial views of the city year after year.

It is estimated that over three million people were affected by the disaster. As a child, my knowledge of the events was mediated by overheard conversations between adults. There was a Geiger Counter in a drawer, and there were stories of family friends who refused to go to Pripyat as part of their jobs. There were passing comments about how that summer everyone in Moscow felt exhausted and the city seemed dark, how all the children got sick in the few years that followed. More recently, the stories have become more concrete. The Geiger Counter was a gift from a family friend so that my mother could take it to farmers' markets to measure the radiation in fruit. Produce had suddenly fallen in price and may have come from contaminated areas. My father recently recalled that people brought in scarce items, like televisions, cars, fur coats, and building materials to sell cheaply in Moscow. They were all from abandoned Pripyat and the surrounding villages, suggesting a chain of provenance to the signs of looting in McMillan's photographs and trajectories of these nuclear objects.

The task of containing radiation required mobilization of massive military, scientific, and civilian resources of the Soviet Union. In the days, weeks, and months after the disaster, the areas of Ukraine,Belarus, and neighbouring Russia became war zones less than a generation after the horrors these same places experienced in WWII. Unlike the physical violence, looting, and scarcity of the war, however, the cleanup efforts seemed bizarre and otherworldly to the largely agrarian population that lived in the towns and villages surrounding Chernobyl. Entire settlements were bulldozed and buried, crops and livestock culled, people told to destroy produce from their home gardens. To frame the public understanding of the disaster and to inspire nationalist sentiment, the Soviet press covered the events like a war waged by humanity against the forces of nuclear power. Thousands of young conscripts were sent to the site to act as 'liquidators', often without knowledge of the long-term dangers. Their sacrifice was heralded as a heroic feat, and their memorials fashioned after war statuary. The same events were later positioned as a catalytic act of disappointment with the Soviet rule, especially in Ukraine, and ultimately cited as the cause of its severance from the USSR.

Preceding the disaster, both sides of the Iron Curtain were taught to be ready for nuclear war: a bomb, followed by evacuation to underground shelters and bunkers, complete with supplies of radiation-proof food. Nuclear tests produced widely circulated images of the mushroom clouds and total devastation, followed by human resilience in the face of disaster, and idyllic family survival as advertised through brochures and television programs that reassured the public that their lives could continue after a blast. However, none of these projects had provided a way to imagine the long-term consequences of radiation, which renders everything in the vicinity into pockets of deadly invisible peril. McMillan's images challenge our ability to understand disaster in the abstract, without a rhetoric that offers it up for visualization.

The absences implied by the open ordinary spaces in McMillan's images, combined with their repetition year after year, speak to that unseen process. The only visible force is growth, not the radiation that continues to permeate it. The utopian view of the abandoned city coming back to life through nature, gradually re-inhabited with rare species of birds and returning wild animals, is misleading. Indeed, the city is overgrown, but the growth rings contain radiation, and the nuclear plant itself is only tenuously covered with a weathering sarcophagus. Since the area will not be safe for human habitation for another 20,000 years, we face the question of how to pass on the knowledge of the disaster and the responsibility for preserving its memory.

On a personal level, the question of memory and the dangers of forgetting in McMillan's images acquires a different weight. I cannot overlook the literal and ethical distance between my nostalgic pull to inhabit the photographs, and the inaccessible personal histories that are associated with these specific sites. Marianne Hirsh's definition of postmemory is "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right". Postmemories are defined by experiences passed on to generations through resonances and after-effects, framed by fleeting and incomplete conversations, and ultimately the impossibility of communication: a constant oscillation between continuity and rapture. Hirsh sees photography, and the belief in reference to reality it engenders, as a connecting thread between those who lived through the events and the generation that follows - exactly because of photography's capacity to remain open to projection, while staying intimately tied to its subject, yet always painfully opaque.

The framing, colour, and the direct compositions in McMillan's photographs allow me to both keep my distance and to begin to understand the spaces in the images. They encapsulate the world around me before memory took shape. But the pangs of nostalgia in looking at the images, recognizing fleeting signs that link back to my own life, do not constitute a longing for a lost homeland but a piercing realization of the speed of growth and decay that so precisely parallels my own. The strangely familiar classrooms and hospital waiting rooms, with specific chairs, finishes, windows, architecture - it is always the most innocuous things. These are also the institutionalized spaces that were standardized under the Soviet regime, and have grown to signify oppression, despite being initially built as models for a modernist utopia. The same process is at play in postmemory, as the photographs stand in for the absence of remembering and the impossibility of accessing a past, encapsulating the failure of homecoming.

By taking photographs of the same sites year after year, McMillan invites us to know Pripyat through his images. Unlike the popular genre of photographing ruins, he does not strive for picturesque vistas of collapse, or metaphors of loss, nor the decay of the Soviet utopia, but for specifics: how a vine has grown since the last image, how a tree has made its way through a window. These raise questions about why furniture has moved from one image to the next, or what caused such sudden fading of a portrait. This process is much closer to recollection. It is in the constant movement back and forth through time that renders the spaces in the photographs as simultaneously concrete and virtual, the images both as mnemonic of the disaster and irrefutably tethered to the place and time they were taken, while foreshadowing the future of the city as a lush forest.

We imagine that the places we leave will remain intact as they await our return. McMillan's photographs prove otherwise: that a place continues to live, without us, and always on its own terms. The city is suspended in time to preserve the traces of those who inhabited it, while letting them go gradually as the trees grow and the walls crumble. In his photographs the responsibility of collective remembering of the Chernobyl disaster encounters my personal flashes of postmemory. This allows for a seemingly impossible simultaneity, in which one is looking in two directions at once both to the past and the future. In McMillan's images, the impossibility of return is met with the danger of forgetting.-

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Natalia Lebedinskaia
Curator of Contemporary Art
Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

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LIST OF WORKS

Flags in Stairwell, Pripyat, 1994, 16x20
Public Swimming Pool, Pripyat, 1996, 16x20
Public Swimming Pool, Pripyat, 2003, 16x20
Hospital Waiting Room, Pripyat, 1995, 16x20
Political Sign in Basketball Court, Pripyat, 1998, 16x20
Railroad Station, Janov, 1996, 24x30
View of the Nuclear Power Plant, 2004, 36x44
Military Radar near Chernobyl, 1997, 36x44
Dormitory Room, Pioneer Camp, 1997, 36x44
Tree in Hotel Room, Pripyat, 2004, 36x44
Basket ball Court, Pripyat, 2007, 36x44
View of Forest, Dental Hospital, Pripyat, 2012, 36x44
Political Classroom, Pripyat, 2004, 36x44
Music Room, Kindergarten, Pripyat, 2004, 36x44
Lobby, Children's Hospital, Pripyat, 2012, 36x44
Metal Fabricating Facility, Pripyat, 2013, 36x44
Pripyat Boating Club, 2012, 36x44
Flags in Stairwell, Pripyat, 2013, 36x44
Floor, Geography Classroom, Pripyat, 201, 36x44
Kindergarten Floor, Pripyat, 2006, 36x44
Kindergarten Locker Room, Pripyat, 2012, 36x44
Red Floor, School, Pripyat, 2004, 44x54
School Gymnasium, Pripyat, 2003, 44x54
School Classroom, Pripyat, 2002, 44x54
Rehabilitation Pool, Children's Hospital, Pripyat, 1998, 44x54

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