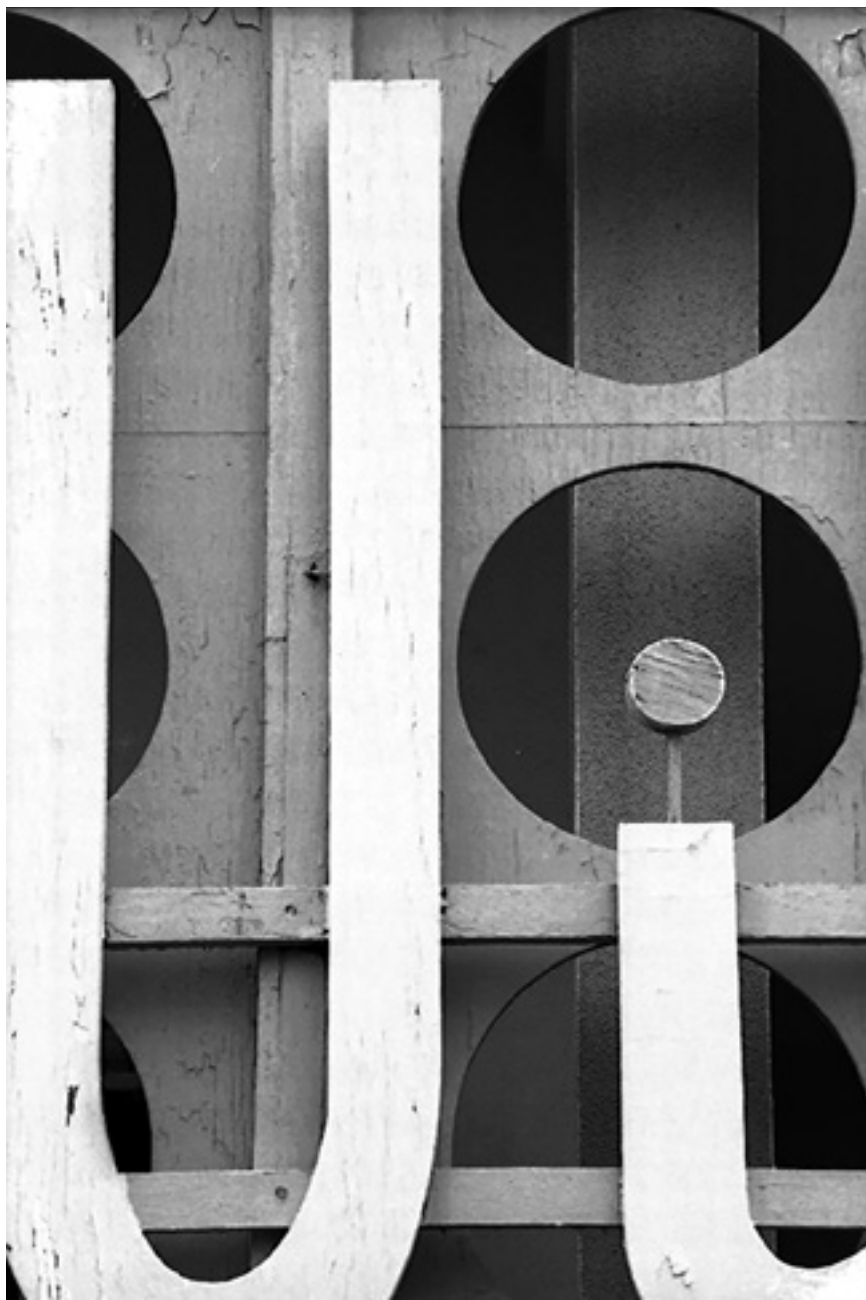


NEAL SNIDOW

*Isle Sign,
Apartment Letters, 2014*
Silver gelatin prints, 16 x 24 in



NEAL SNIDOW

Meter to the Black

Composition of Loss

In 1996 I began to make pictures of my hometown in Southern California. A beach town, it offered photographic attractions like sunsets and “views,” but those weren’t what drew me. Instead, I chose as my subjects details of the suburbia in which I had grown up: apartment facades, backyards, bits of parks and schools, as well as odd, anonymous objects—railings, fences, electric meters. Like my subjects, I was practically invisible myself in my middle-aged pursuits. I photographed them methodically from a tripod onto black and white film, a wordless man bent over the camera framing images of a retaining wall or ground littered with eucalyptus leaves.

It’s hard to remember now why this project presented itself with such force, but one of the main causes must have been the great grief my wife and I were then experiencing. After years of trying to have children, we’d lost a horribly expensive in vitro pregnancy—our last chance, or so we felt, at being parents, and we were devastated. A painful blankness took hold of life. My wife would come home from work each day in what seemed to me a white, chalk-like haze of hurt. As for me, on semester leave from my job teaching English, I had plenty of time to stew; and in a genteel, steady, and prodigious way, like the pale host of my Virginia forbears, I drank from March through May until I couldn’t drink any more. The drink, the triple Scotches doubled and trebled, achieved its familiar tincture of de-

pression, a permanent iris effect like a soiled copper wash out on the edge of things, a sort of peripheral yellow the acid hue of film development chemistry.

I felt deeply lost. Then, like a sudden punctuation mark, I felt a chest pain one afternoon while I was cooking dinner. I kept sautéing onions, wondering what to do, but the pain didn’t stop. At the emergency room, all tests for this fugitive heartache turned negative, but during the night I spent under observation in the hospital, the larger questions of mortality—of what Emerson called “the lords of life”—kept appearing as embodied dream figures in my half-sleep: querulous old men losing their way to the bathroom, and strapping night nurses guiding them to their beds in loud, hectoring voices. At one point early in the morning, a strange woman strode from nowhere into the room as though in a James Thurber cartoon, looked brightly at me and then at the patient heretofore hidden behind a screen in the next bed. “Oh you have to see this!” she said, and cheerfully threw the curtain aside to reveal my absolute twin, a bearded middle-aged lookalike who grinned ecstatically at me like a lost brother before bursting into the stuttering baby talk of a stroke victim.

As a lifelong reader, it was disappointing in a time of crisis to see how little solace there was in this central activity of my personality. As if in a B movie, I could see my hand dipping fatefully into the motel nightstand for the Gideon Bible, therein to find that peace that passeth all understanding, but this melodramatic instant never arrived.

Instead, I continued to plow through my current book, something by the Jungian James Hillman. I was feeling the double bind of interest and frustration that talk about the soul brings to the soul in pain—everything seems right enough, but none of it makes one feel any better. However, Hillman kept mentioning “the images,” and this puzzled me. I supposed he meant the pictures in dreams; but this felt incomplete, in the same way Hillman’s whole effort, despite its brilliance, lacked some crucial efficacy, like out-of-date medication—perhaps like the prodigious flow of J&B and Johnnie Walker I’d been purchasing the last few months under the discreet liquid eyes of the East Indian convenience-market manager and his sari-clad mother seated beside the newspaper racks. I let Hillman’s book go idle, but the idea of pictures stayed with me; and as the