

Real Estate's Reality Effect Chris Balaschak

Writing on Julia Margaret Cameron, historian Carol Armstrong has suggested that the photographic album is the domestic and feminine site of photography. Cameron's albums were particularly apt in this regard. Created at home, in the alchemical realm of the late 19th century photo-lab, Cameron's albums were a noisy montage of theatrical images rooted in the power of photography's "reality effect." The potential for photography to at once recompose the world while exploit its reality effect, receives a similar domestic treatment in the work of Isabelle Hayeur. In Hayeur's series *Model Homes*, the domestic is literally made feminine. Each model home, photographed and recomposed through digital montage, is granted a female name, an act typical for the model home industry. Unlike Cameron's alchemical, analog depictions, however, Hayeur hides her craft behind the seamless high fidelity of digital rendering. Furthermore, rather than the subtle space of the photographic album, Hayeur's feminine-domestic is manifest in grand scale.

The historical changes from Cameron to Hayeur, from the alchemical photo lab to the realm of digital fidelity, owe themselves as much to the monumental shifts of photography in the 20th century, as they do to shifts in the politics of representation. While Cameron worked in a period where the reception of photography was limited to the periphery of the fine arts, Hayeur works at a moment when the potential for digitally fabricated subversion of the everyday is widespread. Hayeur makes the gendering of space explicit, while subtly engaging the politics of peripheral domesticity. These *Model Homes* sit at the very fringe of society, in that exurban space between suburbia and nature. In this space, they are perhaps central to twenty-first century culture. Hayeur's depiction of these model homes indicates the way modernism strove toward the pleasures and autonomy of the individual, and how that autonomy has, in the postmodern era, been transformed into prefabricated isolation.

Nadia (2004) is an exemplary work in Hayeur's series. As Hayeur has mentioned in a statement on the work, this home, like all the others, is named after a woman. Not any woman in particular, but a name that evokes a sense place, and a sense of personality. *Nadia* evokes foreign exoticism for a home that would otherwise be drab to the point of indifference. A ghostly sheet hangs over the lone front window, veiling and disguising the one portion of this model that expresses any specific architectural motif. The opposite, beige colored wing of the home lies unadorned, as if a contractor misplaced its window. The overall façade is slightly off-balance, the hues of blue and beige are bland, but no more so than the surrounding landscape. It is a desolate vista. We see a recently ground surface, with fresh tractor marks, awaiting carefully planned adornment: first the spider-web of streets, then a carefully planned setting of model homes, and finally a sprinkling of industrial grade shrubbery.

Nadia is prefabricated for its own isolation. Hayeur depicts the home with its door ajar. Beside the door, instead of a house number, there is a nametag stating "Nadia."

Through the door, on the far wall, we catch the edge of a mirror. However, the mirror reflects no one, not the viewer, nor Isabelle Hayeur behind her camera, nor a homeowner, nor Nadia. A name without a face, *Nadia* is an image of both isolation and anonymity. In this manner, Hayeur's work recalls many of the finest examples of New Topographic photography to have emerged in the 1970s. Most notably, it brings to mind Robert Adams's image "Colorado Springs" from his landmark 1974 photography book *The New West*. Here, in his signature crisp black-and-white, Adams captures an isolated suburban tract home. Built of brick, and sitting atop a well-groomed front lawn, few clues are provided to give the home any specific sense of place. Yet one clue stands out. Through a glass window, we catch the outline of a woman, with her head and upper torso in silhouette against a window on the opposite side of the house. She is found in profile. It is a silent moment, one that is injected with all the privation of a declining natural landscape by-way of speculative real estate.

John Szarkowski wrote an introduction to *The New West* and noted, "it is clear... that these places are very casually built, and will therefore acquire character soon enough." Isabelle Hayeur's photographs are a reconsideration of that position. Yes, these *Model Homes* are casually built, as they are industrially fabricated and constructed with ease. However, the character they bring forth is incongruous with the surrounding landscape, as it is the product of market research and savvy real estate development. Though apt in 1974, Szarkowski's statement can today be seen as a nostalgic gesture toward an idea of "home" that has been transformed into prefabricated market speak.

Rather than any organic sense of place, these model homes are highly fabricated myths, formed around market potential rather than extant communal identity. Hayeur's role in this market myth is the one of critic. Take *Tiffany* (2005). Evoking the elegance of the glass and crystal manufacturer, *Tiffany* is aimed at a different class than *Nadia*. *Tiffany* depicts a chalet-style, luxury vacation home. It is located before artificially groomed ski-slopes and a bastion of cookie cutter condominiums. In the mid-ground of the image, a red min-van passes by, cluing us in to the neighborhood's conservative family ethics. Like all her *Model Homes*, Hayeur's photograph of *Tiffany* is as composed, and prefabricated, as the home depicted. Displacing one model home from its context, and replacing it with another, Hayeur's images draw our attention to the dissonance between site and place, between the landscape where the home is situated and the home itself. Hayeur denotes the reality effect of industrialized home construction. At the periphery, in a liminal site between nature and culture, Hayeur distends the arbitrary relationship between architecture and geography. In the same gesture, she highlights the critical role of photography in reminding us of how our postmodern sense of domesticity has been isolated at the periphery of market speculation.

Bibliography

Adams, Robert. *The New West* (Boulder, Colorado: Colorado Associated University Press, 1974).

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