

A Microcosm of the South

by *Laura Bullard*

In each image of Micah Cash's *Waffle House Vistas* series, the first thing we see is the window. The vista. The thin dividing line between anywhere and somewhere particular, somewhere distinct. Looking through it tells us: "You are squarely situated in time and space."

One says, "It is nighttime," another, "It is raining." (Store #2181: Birmingham, Alabama; and Store #919: Marianna, Florida, respectively.) One places you in a quiet residential neighborhood (Store #1774: Marion, North Carolina), another drops you smack-dab in the middle of a bustling city center (Store #1: Avondale Estates, Georgia).

Store #449 in Charlotte, North Carolina, sits across the street from a Motel 6, exactly 12.6 miles from my childhood home. In high school, anytime my mom

smelled smoke on my clothes, I would say I'd just come from the Waffle House. This was rarely true and never convincing.

What we see through Cash's windows changes—the balmy Charleston parking lot is lined with palm trees; the grass is dead in Memphis. The interiors, though, are largely static. This is the series's first nod toward the conciliatory magic of the franchise.

Because our attention is hyper-focused on the ways in which the vistas shift and evolve, our gaze is unwittingly drawn deeper into the image. In the documentary photographic tradition, the distance between the subject and the viewer (and the image and its significance) is delineated by the lens of the camera (or, perhaps, if we're being entirely literal, the pane of glass set over the photograph once it's

developed, printed, framed, and hung). Much of the work of deriving significance, then, happens on our side of the glass. Outside of the image.

In his seminal work *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), 20th-century media critic and philosopher Vilém Flusser writes about a sort of mimetic moving backward in an attempt to understand the space between the image and its significance. To draw up a simple comparison, with paintings, he explains, this space is mediated by the painter. “Painters work out the symbols of the image ‘in their heads’ so as to transfer them by means of the paintbrush to the surface,” he writes. “If one wishes to decode such images, then one has to decode the encoding that took place ‘in the head’ of the painter.”

With photography, that simple mediation is indelibly obscured by the camera. And so, Flusser suggests, it is impossible to get at the significance of an image without understanding how the camera functions, both technically and societally—how it functions as an image maker in the most literal and the most abstract sense.

“Thus photographs also have to be decoded as an expression of the concealed interests of those in power,” he writes, “the interests of Kodak shareholders, of the proprietors of advertising agencies, those pulling the strings behind the US industrial complex, the interests of the entire US ideological, military and industrial complex. If one exposed these interests, every single photograph and the whole photographic universe could be considered as having been decoded.”

In early 2007, I took a photograph of my bed. On the floor next to it are two teacups, one full of bourbon and the other full of hot tea. There is a small circular burn in the bedspread. The photo was taken to document the burn, which had just extinguished itself. The camera I used was a Fujifilm disposable 35mm camera. Fujifilm, in its 2007 Annual Report, explained to its shareholders and potential investors that it felt a

corporate responsibility to “help enhance the quality of life of people worldwide.”

By the end of 2007, the company’s net income had declined by 27.4 percent, in large part due to “such factors as the slowdown in the U.S. economy stemming from the sub-prime housing loan problem.” According to the Distilled Spirits Council, the overall market for whiskey increased 4.6 percent between 2006 and 2007.

If Flusser presses the viewer to look behind the image to discern its significance, Cash’s work begs her to do memetic work in the opposite direction to very similar effect. Again, as we focus on the vistas in each image—the literal windows—we are drawn through the first layer of glass (the lens of the camera), and into, well... the Waffle House. In the looking through, we find ourselves fortuitously inside. The windows pull us through the first layer of the image and into the raw space of the diner. And because these photographs are not built for folks who’ve never stepped foot inside a Waffle House (these are images for the well-initiated Southerner) this experience is remarkably sensory at first.

We catch a glimpse of the red vinyl booth benches and instantly feel them sticking to our bare legs on a humid midsummer night. We see the neon yellow signage and smell the half-burnt hash browns: scattered, peppered, capped. We see the hot sauce, the smudgy stainless steel napkin holder, the salt, the pepper, and we know where we are. This is the immutable, staid iconography of the Southern diner.

And once inside, intuitively, we know what is immediately out of frame. Cash forces us to do the work here. There are no humans in his images—no patrons, no waiters. There is also, remarkably, no food. We read these silences in the image quickly and without thought, and these readings are mediated first by identity, then by experience, nostalgia, and sense memory. In a kind of reverse-Flusserian motion, we find ourselves inside the diner, layers and layers and layers away from the image

maker, and yet still slamming hard into the very same power structures Flusser encountered in his mimetic sprint in the exact opposite direction.

The possible out-of-frame readings of the photographs are as varied and complicated as the American South itself. For some of us, the Waffle House represents great trauma, insidious cruelty. In 2018, there were at least four incidents of racial violence horrifying enough to capture national attention, and 2018 was not an exception to the rule. Ironically, it was simply the rule caught on camera. The Southern diner as a backdrop to racial violence is as old as the Southern diner itself.

For some of us, particularly for those of us whose lives are in flux for one reason or another, the Waffle House represents continuity. While the vistas may change, the interiors remain similar. The red vinyl booths stick to your legs in North Carolina the same as they do in Alabama, the same as they do in Tennessee. A Waffle House cup of coffee varies only in how heavy a grounds scooper your particular waiter is, or perhaps in how long it's been sitting in the pot.

In my out-of-frame reading, I am 22. If the vista is coastal South Carolina, then out of frame, there is a lit cigarette hanging precariously from a shitty black plastic ashtray. On my plate, still hot from the electric dishwasher, there's a biscuit smothered in grayish sausage gravy. Next to it, there's a ratty paperback. I've come alone to stave off a hangover. I've called out of work.

Carson McCullers, another woman with a particularly crushing affinity for the bottle, penned a brief little essay on the influence of Russian realists on Southern writers in 1941—a decade and a half before the first Waffle House opened its doors and just over two decades before her untimely death at 50. (Yes, this means McCullers, too, might have nursed a hangover in a Waffle House.)

McCullers, as many a Southern reader knows, both felt and fixated on the alienation and despair of the

American South to devastating effect. There is a certain strategy, a mode of creating, that McCullers employed in her writing, which she attributed first to the Russian realists. "The technique is briefly this," she writes, "a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail."

Cash's photographs, viewed in conjunction with one another, hang strangely, precariously in this same realm of the Southern Gothic. Precariously and strangely because the viewer must find herself inside of the photograph for the conceit to work. The silences in the image—what lies out of the frame—are the immense and the sacred elements. Our traumas, our histories, our hunger. The trivial and the bawdy are the bright lights, the red booths, the salt, the pepper, the varied elements that make up the setting for our enormous projections.

Taken separately, the silences in the photos are less significant. It is the repetition, the wild, exaggerated repetition (the meaning is out of frame over and over, and over, and over, and over) that feels baffling, disorienting.

Flannery O'Connor, another giant of the tradition, explains of her work: "I have to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose.... This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal."

And so Cash's simple photographs do reveal: In its ubiquity, the Waffle House is a microcosm of the South (and perhaps a microcosm of the Southerner). A still point, unchanging and static, that holds everything we carry with us, from the mundane to the hideous, inside of itself in perpetuity.