

Aram Moshayedi, "Stephen G. Rhodes at Overduin and Kite," www.afterall.org,
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Stephen G. Rhodes at Overduin and Kite
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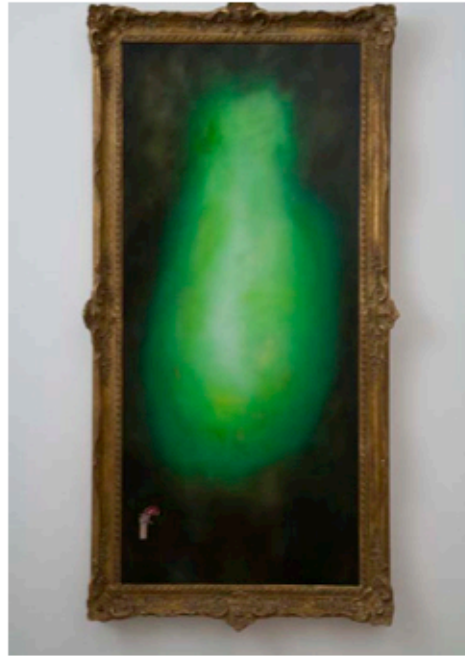
I was coming from the recreated New Orleans of Disneyland, and I wanted to check my reactions against the real city, which represents a still intact past, because the Vieux Carré is one of the few places that American civilization hasn't remade, flattened, replaced.¹

Writing in 1975 as he toured the United States in search of cultural authenticity, Umberto Eco had little idea that exactly thirty years later the Vieux Carré, his proposed seat of the American real, would be threatened with total destruction. Despite Hurricane Katrina and the levees that unleashed massive devastation onto much of New Orleans, the city's historic French Quarter, situated above sea-level unlike much else in surrounding parts, was saved from submersion and, thus, the remaining shreds of Eco's American urban-historical real were preserved. The Old Square retained its hold on history while other sections of the city were literally washed away or transformed, and Eco's ominous words were given new life. For when he wrote, 'New Orleans is not in the grip of a neurosis of a denied past; it passes out memories generously like a great lord,' it was unlikely that he was referring to places like Saint Bernard Parish that have, since 2005, borne the burden of a recent and haunting history. Given the reconstruction effort that continues into the present, in the parts of the city situated below sea level, it is impossible to deny the recently past.

It is in the context of these memories that

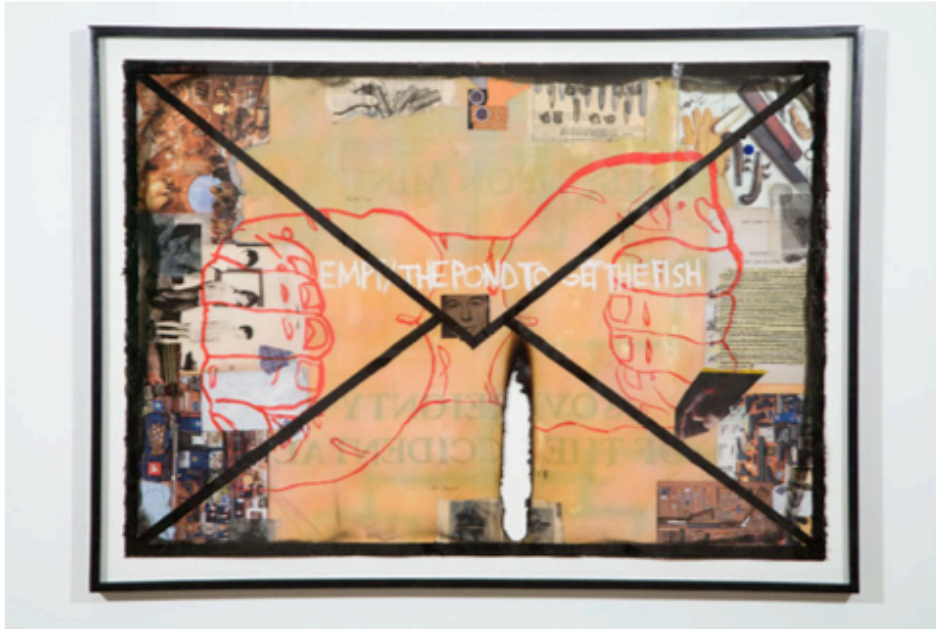


Louisiana-native Stephen G. Rhodes' recent exhibition entitled 'Ruined Dualisms'² is largely situated. Operating much like nineteenth century European and American landscape painting, or, more recently in the history of art, Robert Smithson's *Nonsites* from the late 1960s, Rhodes' project attempts to visualize a concept of place and somehow embody that which is unable to be physically imported into the context of the gallery. The elements that make up this systemic *mise en scène* are a carefully plotted collection of references to the artist's place of upbringing. Here, Louisiana exists as a photographic trace woven throughout two series of collage works entitled *Post Dualistic Bresson Notes* (2007) and *Excerpt* (2007) that take the fact and fiction, fantasy and biography of the place in question as their point of departure. Rhodes' own family snapshots mingle here with touristic images of Disneyland's New Orleans Square, as well as recent scenes from the actual city in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The exhibition's centerpiece, two double-sided video projections entitled *Dualism 2* (2006) and *Dualism 3* (2007) follow this logic as the artist and his kin perform two ceaseless duels in rural Louisiana. The four axial video projections that make up these combined works are surrounded with additional objects that refer to Rhodes' particular elsewhere:



overturned buckets and wooden chairs serve as projector plinths; tree branches give structure to the two symmetrically oriented screens, one of which incorporates decoupage postal detritus that alludes to the places and the participants involved in the video's production—Disabled Veterans of America, Rosalind Rhodes, Overduin and Kite, Mr. & Mrs. Bill Rhodes, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge are just a few of the bits of text that can be deciphered. Much like Smithson's translation of the terrestrial into the topographical, the exterior world enters the gallery at the level of representation and thus separates the concept, or image, of one place from its source.

The specters of this place-in-ruins haunt the installation most in a series of 'Vacant Portraits' that flank the gallery's main space. Recalling the paranormal, these painted portraits of absence bring to mind the obsessions with the supernatural that occupied much of early photography. Believed by mid-nineteenth century American popular audiences to be a conduit for apparitions, the camera provided an opportunity to imagine the invisible and capture the ethereal presence of subjects removed from the physical world. Like the duality inherent in early photography, Rhodes' project tows the line between the supernatural and the evidentiary to reveal the processes of mourning. The city evoked by the expanded system that makes up 'Ruined Dualisms' begins to resemble an apparition from the otherworld. Louis Kaplan has recently argued that the discovery of spirit photography was enmeshed within the life and death experiences of the American Civil War, and that the desire for this technology to produce the otherwise invisible traces of the dead among the living was largely the result of the experience of loss. Rhodes both reexamines and reenacts the rituals through which nineteenth century American popular audiences performed and visualized grief. Even if the city of New Orleans, or at least its French Quarter, has persisted in the face of total removal, Rhodes' project acts as something of a conduit, tinged with the glow of melancholy; beckoning the spirits on both the other side of the image and the other side of the country; and gripped by the neurosis of a perpetual past.



- 1 *Travels in Hyperreality*, Umberto Eco (1975)
- 2 *Ruined Dualisms*, Overduin and Kite Gallery, 24 October - 28 November 2007, <http://www.overduinandkite.com/>

Images:

- 1 *Ruined Dualisms*, 2007, installation view, courtesy Overduin and Kite, photograph by Joshua White
- 2 *Vacant Portrait 14*, 2007, oil and collage on canvas, framed 81 1/2 x 42 x 5 1/2 each, courtesy Overduin and Kite, photograph by Joshua White
- 3 *Post-Dualistic Bresson Notes (Empty the Pond...)(Blanchot)*, 2007, mixed media on paper, 33 5/8 x 46 1/8 inches, courtesy Overduin and Kite, photograph by Joshua White