

Pool at Uday's Palace
(from the *Breach* series),
2009, digital c-print
acromounted to Flexi,
132 x 243 cm (unframed).
Courtesy the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery,
New York



Richard Mosse

The Fall

Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
19 November – 23 December

There is a trio of photographs in Richard Mosse's debut exhibition that would seem to tell the whole story. What we might call the central panel of this triptych, *Pool at Uday's Palace* (all works 2009), shows a team of seven marines, some sitting, some standing, some reclining poolside at what is left of Uday Hussein's onetime getaway on a hilltop in Iraq. The panorama behind the men is spectacular. The parapet of the pool terrace runs parallel to the top and bottom edges of the image, which tells us Mosse is a formalist. But he's not so much of one as to disregard a decisive moment. One reclining Marine, helmet off, legs crossed, has his arms raised, palms up and head cocked to the side as if to say, 'Fuck it, can't we enjoy ourselves?' The gesture is directed at one of the soldiers standing at left, whose own slightly inclined stance betrays a stern authority and disapproval: 'Get your fucking Kevlar back on'.

The scene is worthy of Watteau, but this is obviously no *fête galante*. There's rubble in the pool and not a shred of green — plus, we're in a world without women. Whatever is libidinal about it comes in the embrace of death. This is confirmed in what I'll call the left panel of the triptych, *Foyer at Uday's Palace*, which pulls the camera back five metres and under a stone balcony. The attention of five marines still in the scene is held by something down in the landscape. One marine is crouched at the parapet with rifle raised. Everyone's helmet is on.

Column at Uday's, the third panel of the triptych, finds the camera panned to the right. Two of the balcony's denuded columns (due to shelling) are now front and centre. The empty pool rushes in at the left, and one of the palace's destroyed walls frames the right. The rest is rubble, a decapitated outbuilding, empty ridges, blue sky.

What about that pool? In the central panel it looks huge, given that it bleeds off the bottom edge of the image, its end accelerating out of the frame. But pull the camera back a bit, as Mosse has done in the other two photographs, and the pool narrows, even appears rather middling. When I say these photographs tell the whole story, that is because they reveal the centrality of this depth-of-field distortion to Mosse's work on the whole. We see it in the photographs of airplane wreckage, such as *C27 Beaver Creek* and *727 Santo Domingo*. And though it is not present in the photographs of the impossibly shot-up wrecks of cars that Mosse captured also while embedded with the US military, these objects' own distortions, and the sandstorm atmospheres that envelope them, would seem to reproduce that formal trick here at the level of content.

It would seem safe to say that with this body of work, which he shot while on the first year of two-year Annenberg Fellowship, Mosse opens up a new and promising chapter in the analytic of the sublime. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*