

Eloise Hess, *Early Morning Tomorrow*
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Another Light

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“...so is touch too of the tangible and the intangible...”
—Aristotle, *On the Soul*

The images appear to emerge from a darkness. They shift, from one to the next, as if a match had been lit, briefly, from inside a moment. Some fall within a range of the recognizable and nameable: I see a finger, aglow, pointing; I see a window with two blocks beneath it, warmed by the sun; I see a reflection of the sky and trees, inverted, in a pool; I see a finger, much closer, blocking what I can see; I see a house, through the leaves, painted red; I see more leaves; I see a finger pointing at the leaves; I see a lake; I see its green horizon; I see a playground with a blue slide; I see a grey VCR player; beside it, a tangle of cords; I see a white dog, looking; I see more trees, more green, clouds over water. The things I cannot name fade into the moving penumbra that inescapably frames my sight.

That penumbra, its partial but insistent shadow, thickens the strangeness around these otherwise everyday pictures of everyday things. It casts a limit, a curious and erratic spreading of the out-of-frame, across the catalog of atmospheric minutiae that make up a summer day's passing. This sequence of 27 images—the number of exposures on a disposable camera, drawn elliptically from different days—was selected from the nine rolls of film that the artist, Eloise Hess, shot with her father, Charles Hess, over a week in July at their family home in Vermont. Scenes of vacation, of leisurely inconsequence and time set adrift, provide the occasion for a kind of seeing—a seeing with, alongside, yet out of synch—that counterpoints the photographs of family reunions with members officially posed, dozens upon dozens through the decades in an ever-accruing collection of scattered and archived relations, tacked directly into the wooden walls of the house.

The camera is less punctual here, even if always still at hand. Not quite the usual tool for remembering, it has been adapted towards something like an active, and patiently attended, forgetting. Together, the artist and her father—a photographer living with the erosion of language, memory, and orientation of early-onset Alzheimer's disease—contrived a doubling of the camera. Using two disposable cameras, they improvised an apparatus for the growing blind spots between his body and mind. Seen through the circular lens of her first, picture-taking camera, positioned to overlap, imperfectly, with the rectangular viewfinder of his second, picture-seeing camera, the simple act of making a photograph is at once prolonged and split. A careful but clumsy guiding of the eye by the hands transforms these photographs from a chemical imprint of captured light, or a souvenir of what lies before the camera, into a transmission, an incidental artifact, of the reality that lies behind both cameras and both hands: touch slipping by.

To be touched by light is what the photograph is, by definition. Traced by an automatic press of a finger, it is a material illusion of the ephemeral made tangible. This urge to catch the evanescent present constitutes the pathos, as well as the commonness, of photography—and the genre of the family or holiday photograph, in particular—as a “middle-brow art,” as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pronounced it to be. Proof of presence

and affiliation—I was there, I was there with you—the photograph affirms a bond, renders it iconic, an instant portrait. In Hess's spare reduction of that icon into the indispensable ground for her painting practice, events and people, those typical markers of the photo-worthy, are absent. A balance tips in her work from wanting to recall someone or something, to put a name or date to it, to wanting to perceive it happening, to discern the ineffable texture of change, its nearly invisible indentations, on the qualities and experience of an environment. To forget becomes a place.

Where light does not touch, where there is no image in these pictures, is where distance turns into proximity, and forgetting is given room to take a meaningful shape. The ubiquitously hovering penumbra sinks into its umbra, the deepest core of a shadow, where the possibility for seeing anything at all is eclipsed by the action of light folding in on itself. This overturning of vision's scope occurs at the gap where the two cameras meet. The mismatch between the viewfinder at the back of one camera and the lens at the front of the other constructs a staggered tunnel flattened into the internal space of these photographs as pictures of the very fact of the double-camera's unavoidable misalignment. The wandering black border unique to each of Hess's photograph-sized paintings demarcates where the painting transmutes into a screen—a cover for the elusive but ongoing process of matter, what and who matters, intangibly disappearing.

A lengthened deferral, or corresponding delay, is formally ingrained into the meticulous processing of these photographs into paintings. Panels coated with encaustic under an unaltered, inkjet print are heated and overlaid by a gauze-thin, silkscreen print of the same photograph chosen from multiple iterations refined through systematic degrees of reproductive variation—dot angles, frequencies, order of colors, opacities, and tones—to materialize, gradually, over days and weeks of further coating, heating, and waiting, the unhurried coaxing of an image into appearance out of the latent visibility of its enveloping shadow. In these screen-printed paintings of photography's dysfunction, its failure to evade a looming finitude, Hess creates a peculiarly fitting medium for the registration of perceptual thresholds. Through her method of amalgamated witnessing, the retreating past dissolves into a renewable immediacy of sharpened observation. Turn remembering over, forgetting is there. Turn forgetting over, time begins again.

The July that they spent taking these photographs, a flood swept through the town and the northern half of the state, washing away roads and bridges and trails. One symptom of her father's disease that Hess notices is a confusion of words, sight, and touch, as if sure sensory paths, too, are dissipating. A chair is no longer a chair, and a fork is not easily named as a fork, or if they are, then not for sitting, or eating. When turned over, the question every photograph begs—what is this, what do I see—reveals what I do not see or cannot know. To stay with these images, as the artist stays with them, at their points of hesitant contact, is to feel myself in touch with, being touched by, something unseen from within: a sensation of moments arising, of waves of time breaking, fluctuating, and returning, sustaining themselves. I begin to forget; I forget to begin; I begin seeing by the unknown sense of another's light.