

# a conversation with eric percher

julie fishkin

The image of the urban landscape springs from collective energy but it's the individual himself who inhabits the space and who, in effect, determines the form. To focus on a given individual—one among many—often means shedding light on the “little guy,” the laborer whose empathetic narrative tempts the lens. Eric Percher, whose project shows a different kind of underdog, explores the reality of the corporate worker for whom the excesses of time spent within his or her office mechanism result in the many notions of success that become our American model of individual gain. Percher grants us access to tacit aggression, struggle, the payoff of the powerful and the privileged, yet without judging or guiding us in the inspection. Because life isn't the perfect movie and often aggression cannot find its outlet and release, we have this threshold of human resistance that Percher explores, that final moment of clarity that may or may not arrive for these otherwise impeccable examples of success and power.

## **Was the project initially a personal story?**

The project started one late night in an office on Park Ave. I was frustrated by an assignment that had to be completed by morning but that I knew was just going to sit in the in-box all the next day. I couldn't leave the office to shoot for my Visual Diary class so I decided to set up a couple of self-portraits in the office of my boss. The next day, when I looked at my slides, I thought, shit, this is my story.

## **How did you find the balance between your artistic aspirations and the decorous world of finance?**

I continued exploring my own creative frustration by shooting self-portraits at work. As I began to show the images to other associates they started to volunteer their own moments of crisis—those times when their jobs seemed so all-absorbing that their work threatened to render the benefits they were working for worthless. On Tuesdays I would set up a shot after work and roam the floors around midnight looking for a suitable subject. There was always more than one.

## **Your photographs tell such an elaborate story. What seems particularly impressive is their lack of judgment. Is that intentional?**

We tend to demonize work, and why not? Most of us feel that if

we are working we are not doing what we would like to be doing. However, if we accept a job it follows that we believe the limitations and requirements of the job will be compensated for by the ability it provides us to meet our personal responsibilities and satisfy our desires. As such, our work reflects a personal judgment. It's that personal judgment of the subject and the viewer that I want to get at.

I worked in this world so believe me, I judge. Without my personal feelings I don't think I could capture the crisis of the subject and thus actuate the viewers confrontation. But if the story supercedes my own personal judgment and therefore you think about the question, not a particular answer, then I am accomplishing what I intended.

## **There is a very distinct element of loneliness in your images. After all, all the subjects are always alone in a vast expanse of office or office-related space. And yet, these photographs are quintessentially New York, a large and very social city where we rub elbows with people daily. That seems ironic. Is that the point?**

Look at these jobs where work becomes so all-encompassing that it threatens to blot out all but its own existence. When there is nothing but work, why do we work?

That the city is present in almost all of the images in the WORK series is just another reminder of the trade-off our subject is making. It's ironic only in as much as it makes us aware that the subject is giving up what he is working for.

## **You mentioned that a Gursky exhibition you saw once really inspired you to photograph the business world but with a focus on the architectural nature of the buildings. What interests you about this aesthetic? Is it the forms and structures or how grand they appear in relation to the little man slaving away in his or her cubicle?**

When the Gursky show hit MOMA in 2001, it had probably been five or six years since I had used a 4-by-5-inch camera. I was intrigued by how Gursky took a format that I associated with

formal architectural imagery and through the ringer of unique perspective and digital manipulation created a final product that was more mind space than real space. I was captivated both by his imagery, particularly how the figure holds up in the face of both natural (Alpine landscape) and man made structure (Shanghai), and by the very idea that a photograph that dealt with such scale could break with formality and represent an idea as much as a truth.

**We spoke briefly about David Fincher's film Fight Club. It's interesting to see actual individuals enduring the daily grind and yet one cannot help but wonder about the pent up aggression within them. Do you aim to show this aggression? Do you find that it manifests itself subtly anyway?**

You are the first to mention that movie.

In Fight Club your job may hold you down but coming together and unleashing your aggression empowers you.

The subjects I work with are definitely Type-A personalities, but they are working aggressive jobs. It's not the aggressive impulse but the creative impulse that is hemmed in by the organizations they work for and the architecture they work within. Their true Fight Club would be a place for personal time and personal space. They need a Spa Club, not a Fight Club.

**These individuals are clearly making a decision to work there despite many obvious existential obstacles. Do the subjects see themselves any differently once they view the image?**

Most of my subjects are thankful for their jobs. They understand that they are lucky to even have the opportunity to make rain in one of New York's most profitable and competitive businesses. At the same time, they know that in order to be successful in these jobs they must accept a work load that leads to an unbalanced lifestyle.

What concerns me most about the subjects, and really about my own experience, is our ability to rationalize maximizing success or pay rather than maximizing joy or happiness. With the WORK series I attempt to show moments of limitation, not because I want to repudiate any individual pursuit of success but because I want to illuminate the ten-

sions and sacrifices required to achieve such success. I want the viewer to consider the same question as the subject: is there sustenance in your hard work and satisfaction in its completion or is this simply an economic transaction? To put it as my subjects might: does the return justify the investment?

**Will you continue with this project, perhaps in other locations? What is the next phase of this project?**

I am moving beyond the office, looking at what occurs during all 24 hours of the day, not just the 12-14 hours spent at the office.

People obsess about their commutes. When I shoot I often hear complaints about how slow the subway gets after midnight or when the last train departs Grand Central, so I started to follow them on the journey home. In a city like New York the commute is work.

While I think the WORK series will end when the subject reaches their doorstep, I believe it might be personally challenging to complete the cycle for myself by following the worker into the home. Tribeca bachelor pad or Scarsdale mock-Tudor, home is a big part of the equation. Maybe its time to see what it is we are all working for. **h**