

Photographer documents human life without people's presence

By Miriam Finder

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From Richard Ehrlich's Belmont Park series, 2004 (Photo courtesy of Richard Ehrlich and the Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica)

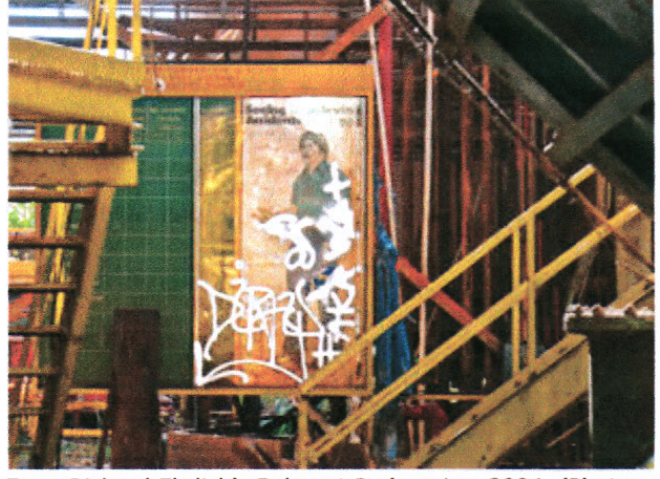
People do not necessarily have to be physically present for others to feel their existence. Sometimes what people leave behind after they depart becomes the defining element of their story.

That is demonstrated in "The Presence of Absence: The Photographs of Richard Ehrlich," opening Saturday at the The exhibit features photographs from five series by Ehrlich: those exploring deserted Namibian diamond mines; Los

Angeles' demolished Belmont Park; Chicago's abandoned Cook County Hospital; a decaying sugar mill in Maui; and Holocaust archives in Germany.

Laband Art Gallery at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester.

Ehrlich's photography starkly represents human vulnerability, abandonment and mortality -



From Richard Ehrlich's Belmont Park series, 2004. (Photo courtesy of Richard Ehrlich and the Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica)

without depicting a single person.

"Everything is certainly very much about human existence, but none of them show a person," said Laband curator Carolyn Peter. "(It is interesting) how these places can be so important and such centers of human life and then suddenly it's abandoned."

"Presence of Absence" explores human interactions in its many forms.

The Namibian diamond mine series, for example, tells of the human exploitation that can result from greed, depicted by decaying wooden huts designed for African laborers contrasted with the lavish homes of mine managers.

Like the Namibian mines, photographs of a dilapidated Maui sugar mill illustrate contrasts.

"In some ways it looks like its decaying, crumbling," Peter said. "But you can also just imagine what a bustling place it must have been at some point."

In these images, text also represents human existence through posters splattered across walls expounding on worker safety, issuing warnings and alerting to danger zones. As the walls crumble away, the remaining words remind viewers of the life the mill once held, Peter said.

Photos of bright, graffiti-covered walls dominate the Belmont Park series, taken in 2004 just weeks before the park was destroyed. Through the spray-painted designs, the lives of underground artists are revealed.

This series reminds viewers of the fleeting nature of human existence and how quickly people's lives and creations can be decimated, Peter said.

The fourth series of the exhibit spotlights Chicago's Cook County Hospital, which was abandoned in 2002. It illustrates a contradiction between the cleanliness associated with hospitals and the decayed, rusting reality that now remains.

An eeriness emanates from the images, as the hospital, although void of people, was left with most of its supplies and furniture inside. Peter describes the photographs as looking as if



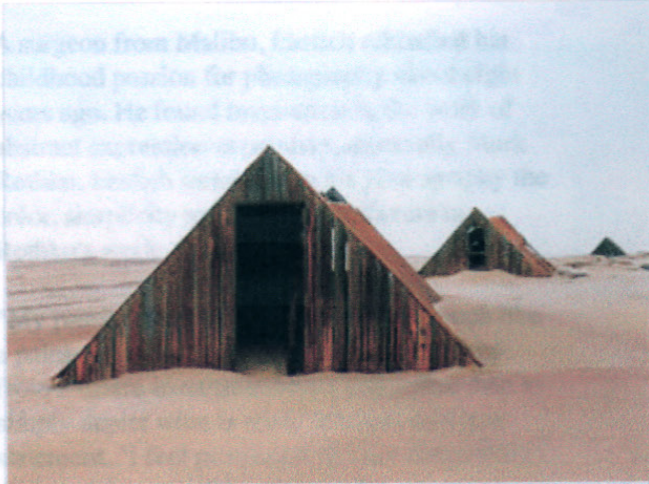
From Richard Ehrlich's Belmont Park series, 2004 (Photo courtesy of Richard Ehrlich and the Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica)

they are from the set of a hospital TV drama, but after the characters have hopped out and left their mess behind.

The crowning series of "Presence of Absence" - and the most powerful, say Peter and Ehrlich - depicts documents and artifacts found in the International Tracing Service Archives in Bad Arolsen, Germany. The archives chronicle the plans and events of Nazi rule.

Although the archives are now more accessible to the public, Ehrlich said he was fortunate to be allowed to explore and photograph the documents. Unsure of what to expect when entering the archives, Ehrlich said, it was an overpowering experience, and the emotions come through in the photographs.

"It's just these beautifully organized archives,"



From Richard Ehrlich's Namibia Diamond Mine series, 2002. (Photo courtesy of Richard Ehrlich and the Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica)

but when you start realizing what those archives are, it's quite shocking and disturbing," Peter said. "Each piece of paper could represent at least one person's life."

The Holocaust series demonstrates not only human vulnerability, but also the horrible atrocities people can perpetrate on one another when they fail to value human life.

The series depicts the Holocaust from an uncommon angle, documenting the events through images of well-kept Nazi files instead of more familiar concentration camp and train car pictures. Included in the series are photographs of Oskar Schindler's list and Anne Frank's identification card telling of her death.

"From a photographic standpoint, no one has seen it before," Ehrlich said.



From Richard Ehrlich's Holocaust Archives series, 2007. (Photo courtesy of Richard Ehrlich and the Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica)

"That just scratches the surface, because there are 50 million documents there representing close to 18 million lives, so you could spend a lifetime there just taking pictures."

Ehrlich said he had not considered displaying these five series collectively and gives Peter credit for envisioning the photographs in one exhibit, tied together by a common thread. He is

unsure why these abandoned locations drew him in, but he said he finds them intriguing. That, he said, is the most important element for any artist.

"I've been doing this long enough to realize, number one, you can't satisfy everybody," said Ehrlich. "The photographer or artist or poet or whatever, they do what's interesting for them."

A surgeon from Malibu, Ehrlich rekindled his childhood passion for photography about eight years ago. He found inspiration in the work of abstract expressionist painters, especially Mark Rothko. Ehrlich translates to his photography the color, simplicity and emotion he favors in Rothko's work.

"My passion for making photographs, much like a painter's passion to lay down marks, comes from a desire to express how I feel rather than to simply depict what is seen," Ehrlich said in a statement. "I feel privileged to have discovered this most transcendent art form."

Miriam Finder is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

The Presence of Absence: The Photographs of Richard Ehrlich

When: Opens Saturday and continues through Nov. 22; gallery hours are noon to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.

Where: Laband Art Gallery, Loyola Marymount University, Westchester; campus visitors are

asked to stop at the guard kiosk at the Main Gate, Lincoln Boulevard and LMU Drive, for a parking permit and directions.

Admission and parking: Free.

Information: 310-338-2880 or <http://cfa.lmu.edu/laband>.