

## ART REVIEW

# What remains when we have moved on

Richard Ehrlich's photographs in 'The Presence of Absence' document abandoned places and people.

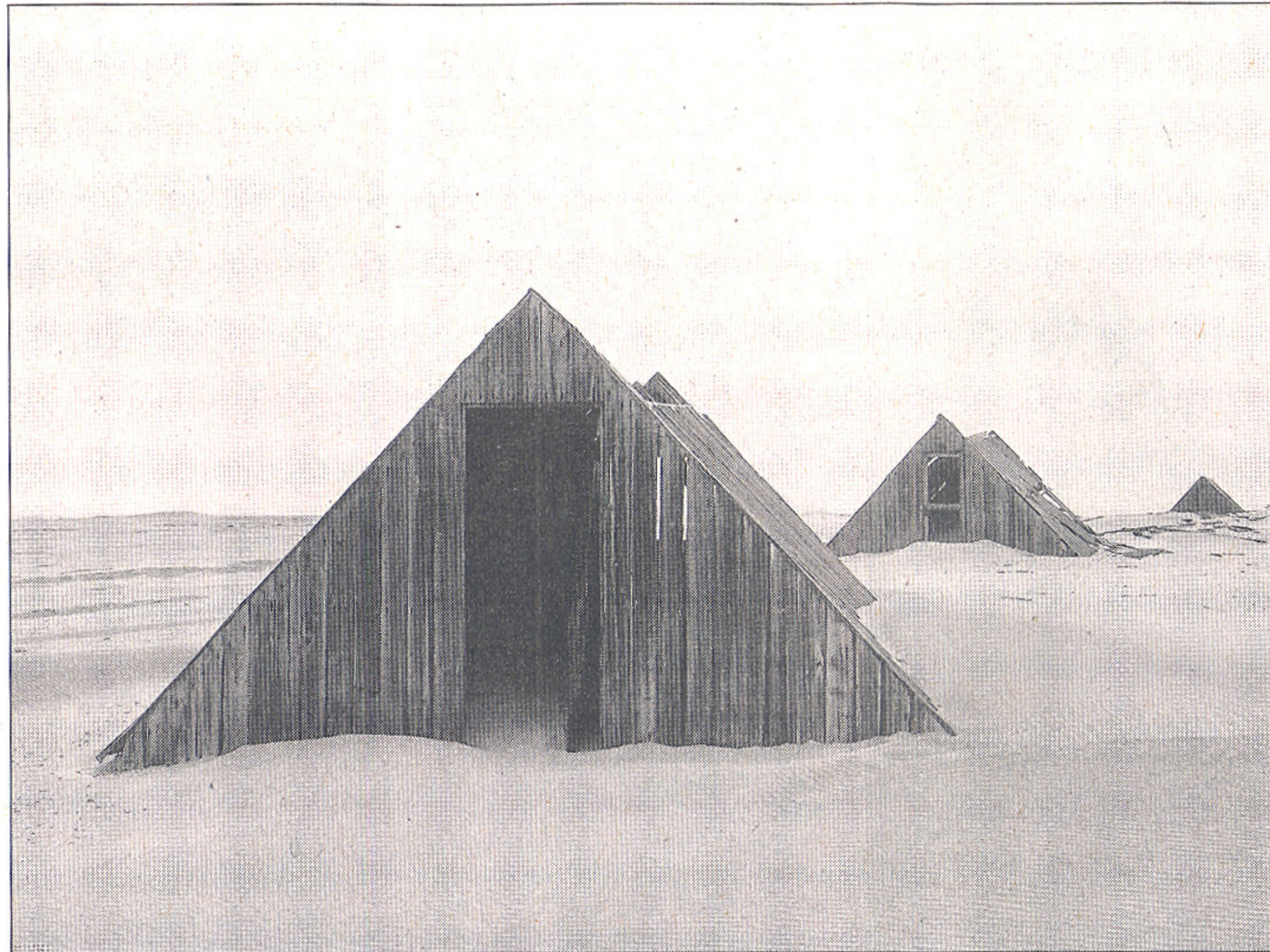
LEAH OLLMAN

Richard Ehrlich comes across as a young, emerging artist, in spite of his 70 years. He took up photography as a serious adjunct to his day job in urological surgery less than 10 years ago and has shot broadly and prolifically — among other subjects, the landscapes of China and Vietnam; abstract crystal patterns; the skies, surfers and lifeguard stations of Malibu; the inner and outer workings of a FedEx hub in Tennessee; seascapes of Vancouver Island; and a community of medieval reenactors.

He's on solid aesthetic ground throughout but still feels somewhat undeclared as an artist, as committed to the beautiful and benign calendar picture as to the intriguing social document. An exhibition at Loyola Marymount University's Laband Art Gallery does Ehrlich a valuable service by presenting a selection of his work unified by a common theme: "The Presence of Absence."

In each of the five series on view, Ehrlich has focused on a site or a population that has been abandoned and photographed architectural or archival remnants that exude loss, trauma, betrayal and decay.

His most substantive contributions to the global image bank come from a series made in a former diamond-mining area of Namibia and another



Photographs by RICHARD EHRLICH Craig Krull Gallery

**DIAMOND MINE:** After taking all the gems, the people left the settlement to the sand.

shot in a Holocaust archive. The Namibian photographs, made in 2002, verge on the surreal: wood-framed buildings buried up to their eaves in sand, and houses flooded with the stuff, golden drifts surging through doorways and creeping up cracked, corroded walls.

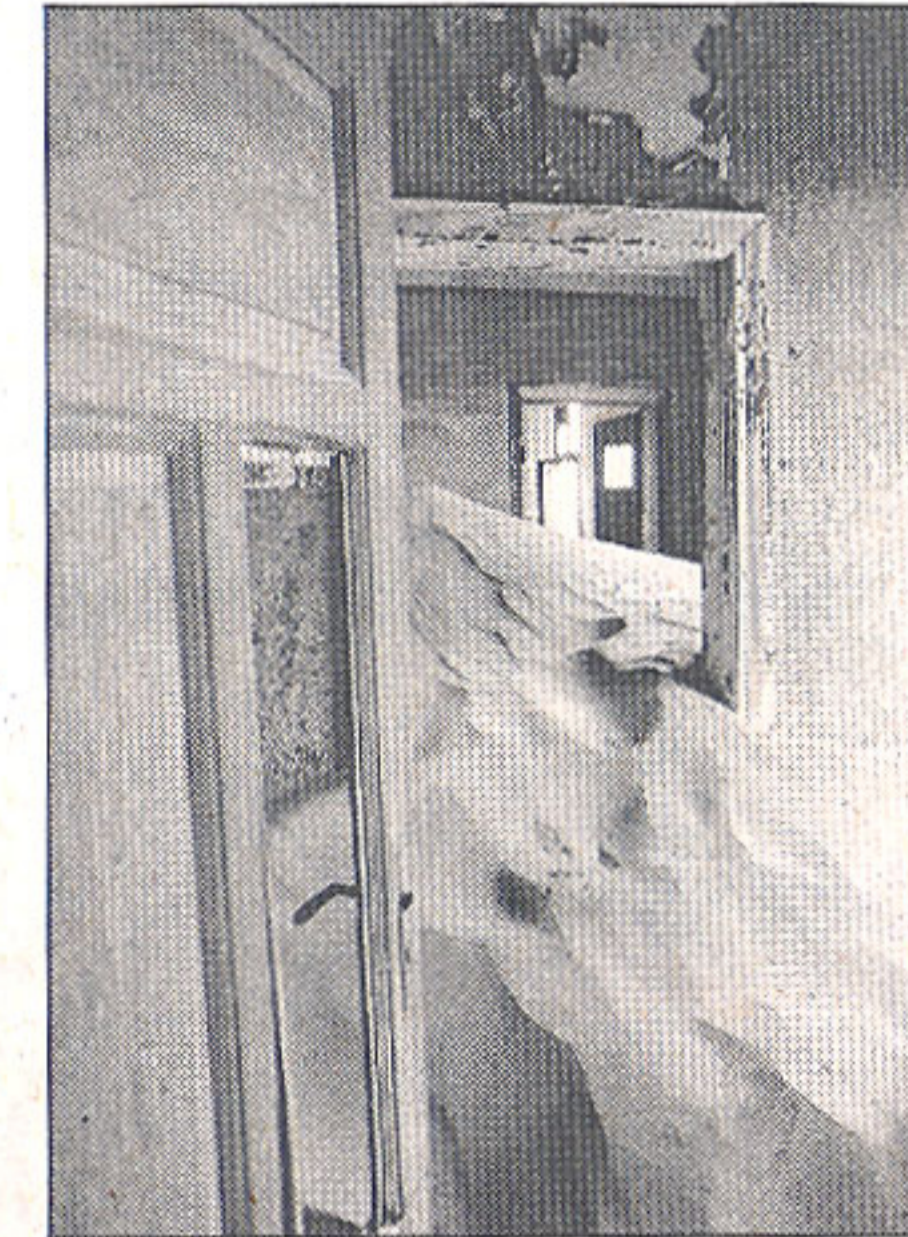
The area, claimed and settled by German expatriates in the early 1900s, was drained of its treasures within 20 years and abandoned to the forces of nature and time. Ehrlich's images, reminiscent of Kenro Izu's gorgeous views of roots subsuming the temple structures at Angkor Wat, are striking set pieces of an implied tragedy.

Destruction of a distinctly human sort is the subject of Ehrlich's photographs made at the International Tracing Service archives in Bad Arolsen, Germany, in 2007. Records at the ITS headquarters document Gestapo orders concerning the mechanics of concentration camps, the organization of ghettos, the exploitation of forced labor and the fate of survivors — in detail and in essence, the wartime and post-war circumstances of more than 17 million people.

Ehrlich documents the documents, and the tremendous power in his pictures lies in his oscillation between attention to the one and to the

many, between the personal story and the scale of the de-personalizing Nazi enterprise. He shows a binder, open to a page recording the day's vermin count in a particular section of a particular camp. Each prisoner's number is inscribed alongside the number of lice they were found to harbor. In another photograph, Ehrlich gazes down a corridor of floor-to-ceiling shelves, dense with boxes. "The Central Name Index" sounds and looks like something out of Borges or Saramago, but it's an actual catalog of actual victims.

The records of such perversely organized cruelty are fascinating, from concentra-



**NO ONE TO SWEEP:** Sand fills an abandoned house in Namibia.

## 'The Presence of Absence: The Photographs of Richard Ehrlich'

**Where:** Laband Art Gallery, Loyola Marymount University, Burns Fine Arts Center, 1 LMU Drive, L.A.

**When:** Noon to 4 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays. Ends Nov. 22.

**Price:** Free

**Contact:** (310) 338-2880, [cfa.lmu.edu/laband](http://cfa.lmu.edu/laband)

tion camp entry books to individual death cards — including, poignantly, Anne Frank's.

Ehrlich's own record reiterates the material's immense human and historical significance.

In the three other series in the show, Ehrlich surveys the graffiti-stained walls of L.A.'s Belmont Park tunnel, a defunct

sugar mill on Maui and the vacated spaces of Chicago's Cook County Hospital.

The hospital, built in the mid-19th century and the site of the nation's first blood bank, appears to have been evacuated without notice, as lab coats still hang on the backs of chairs and desks still hold books and files. Ehrlich's camera lingers on an empty waiting room and a gurney parked on a toxic gold puddle.

Known as Chicago's Ellis Island because it served so many immigrants and poor people, the hospital was replaced by a new facility and added to the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of America's Most Endangered Historic Places in 2004. Ehrlich's series hints at, but doesn't quite achieve, the textural richness and emotional resonance his subject would suggest, qualities that define comparable projects by Stephen Wilkes (the abandoned spaces of Ellis Island itself) and David Maisel (a dilapidated, decayed mental hospital).

Ehrlich is a thoughtful and deliberate visual essayist, exploring diverse themes through extended observation. The Laband show, organized by Carolyn Peter, does an admirable job of demonstrating the photographer's breadth but would have made a better case for his depth by presenting fewer series, with more images from each.

A concurrent show of Ehrlich's new work, views deep into the interior of the human body made using various types of medical imaging, runs at the Craig Krull Gallery at Santa Monica's Bergamot Station through Oct. 10.

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