

Episodes (without a real order) by Leonardo Pucci

Curatorial Note

by

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi

'You can be lonely anywhere,' writes Olivia Laing, in her book *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, 'but there is a particular flavour to the loneliness that comes from living in a city, surrounded by millions of people.'

In one of Leonardo Pucci's photographs a man, enshrouded in the milky blue light of dawn, looks out of the window, his back to us. In another image, a man looks out at us, a coltish figure framed in a dormer window, as dawn breaks around him in golden spray. It would appear the characters – Pucci's subjects in these Carver-esque visual short stories of urban loneliness – could even have a conversation with each other in spatial time. Their solitudes may intersect in unrecorded time.

In Zoe Heller's novel, *Notes on a Scandal*, an aging school teacher reflects on the nature of loneliness that assails her: 'And then, every once in a while, you wake up and gaze out of the window at another bloody daybreak, and think, *I cannot do this anymore. I cannot pull myself together again and spend the next fifteen hours of wakefulness fending off the fact of my own misery.*'

The privations of Pucci's subjects is not this sort of dreary, spinsterish loneliness – there is time for that scorching isolation, most of the subjects are young, fey, radiating spirit and stamina – their loneliness is one of choice. Beautiful beings with many, easy romantic options. Indeed, in some of the images you experience their sexual vivacity, and the idea of brief, anonymous erotic coupling as a kind of companionship unto itself. Two men in a pool – do they know each other, are they friends, lovers, brothers? Have they just met? Are they discussing the stock market – or planning a sexual escapade?

'Photography is always a kind of stealing,' writes Hanya Yanagihara, the author of *A Little Life*. 'A theft from the subject. Artists are assaulters in a lot of ways, and the viewer is complicit in that assault.'

But these photographs suggest that being seen is also a different kind of gift: the gift of attention, of the giving gaze.

While the photographic form emerged out of an older time, when privacy and private living enjoyed wide scale currency, the times we inhabit curry invasion: we post photographs of our parties, our weddings, our losses, our peonies, our children, our cats, and the great, sweeping idleness of our hours, nothing is free from invited scrutiny. What distinguishes these pictures is the stroke of passing intimacy; one experiences a throb of familiarity, the tremor of possibility – in the way one sometimes does on the escalator, when a passing face on the descending scale catches our eye, and we conjure an encounter, impose motive and opportunity, with a face that we shall probably never see again. Perhaps there is a coda to Hanya Yanagihara's sharp, striking idea of photographic theft. And this is the relief of being noticed, even briefly, even if it registers as an intrusion. Perhaps some photography is not a form of stealing, but a contribution, if not of momentary interest or concern, then of pause. Someone saw. *We are not alone.*

While the images do not have the 'grainy quality reminiscent of low-grade peepshow reels' (Merry Alpern described thus her own provocative photographs recording intimate sexual acts in New York), Pucci's shots pay homage, for their composition and in their mood, to the rigor and

brooding alone of Edward Hooper, and his use of light to establish an atmosphere of unassailable loneliness. Like in a Hooper painting, the subjects in this suite of photographs appear solitary in the weight of light they are drawn out of, light with an underwater quality, the wavering light of an aquarium. In Ann Packer's masterful novel, *The Dive From Clausen's Pier*, a mother reflects to her daughter that *lonely is a funny thing*. 'It's almost like another person. After a while, it'll keep you company if you let it.' In Pucci's photographs, the loneliness of his subjects begins to keep us company, if we might let them.

SDS

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi's debut novel, *The Last Song of Dusk*, won the Betty Trask Award (UK), the Premio Grinzane Cavour (Italy), and was nominated for the IMPAC Prize (Ireland). Translated into sixteen languages, *The Last Song of Dusk* was an international bestseller.

Shanghvi's second novel, *The Lost Flamingos of Bombay*, was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize, 2008. His book *The Rabbit and the Squirrel* won huge accolades.

A past contributor to the *New York Times* and *TIME*, he lives in north Goa, where he serves as honorary director for a not-for-profit arts foundation.

His latest book is *Loss*.