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I, Tracy Claire Flagg, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

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In Ruins: Nostalgia and Melancholia in the Photographs of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, 2005-2013

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In Ruins: Nostalgia and Melancholia in the Photographs of
Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, 2005-2013

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Since 2005, photographers Yves Marchand (b. 1981) and Romain Meffre (b. 1987) have produced a large portfolio of photographs made from urban ruins in the United States and Japan and produced three major bodies of work: *The Ruins of Detroit* (Steidl, 2010), a book about Detroit’s abandoned buildings; *Gunkanjima* (Steidl, 2013), a book examining an abandoned Japanese coal mining island; and “Theaters,” an online collection-in-progress of photographs of the remains of early twentieth-century American cinemas and stage theaters. Despite a straightforward approach to photographing their subjects, Marchand and Meffre express nostalgia in their images through the strategic repetition of certain motifs. They eschew sociopolitical concerns in their photographs and instead create poignant testimonials to the past. Throughout their body of work, they succeed in imparting their philosophy relating to the life cycles of ruins and societies through an ostensibly documentary mode of photographing.

Marchand and Meffre’s portfolio is a case study of an aesthetic that is gaining popularity because of the popular cultural phenomenon in recent years of urban exploration, or “urbex.” Many practitioners of urban decay photography produce such images simply to record their exploration. Although some critics deprecate images like these as “ruin porn”—aestheticization lacking in theoretical depth—Marchand and Meffre’s photographs provide moving philosophical interpretations of abandoned spaces.

Marchand and Meffre profess a belief in a powerful correlation between individual tendencies and the nature of societies. The impermanence demonstrated by ruins is, in their view, a representation of the predispositions of human nature. To them, ruins are the physical
legacy of the ideas and values of societies. Their photographs demonstrate the decay of matter and the impermanence inherent in that which we construct upon the earth.

Through their sensitivity to the concepts of time and ephemerality, interest in the aesthetic and sociological import of the architecture of societies, and pictorial and theoretical affiliations with canonical artists such as Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985), Eugène Atget (1857-1927), André Kertész (1894-1985), Walker Evans (1903-1975), and Aaron Siskind (1903-1991), as well as contemporary artists Robert Polidori (b. 1951), Camilo José Vergara (b. 1944), Andrew Moore (b. 1957), Mathew Merrett (b. 1960), Hiroshi Sugimoto (b. 1948), Hollis Hammonds (b. 1971), and Tacita Dean (b. 1965), Marchand and Meffre demonstrate their pronounced sophistication in depicting urban ruins. Through the use of icons such as the clock and window, the theater, and the calendar; motifs of personal belongings and handheld or manipulated objects; and references to time, cycles, and spectacle, Marchand and Meffre evoke nostalgia and melancholia throughout their entire body of documentary photographs. Although their three bodies of work feature very different subject matter, they are philosophically united by the photographers’ metaphorical inferences.
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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Janet Rodger, from whom I inherited my love of art, and my grandfather, Bob Rodger, who passed down to me his fervor for learning (and who believed in me until the end).
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For instilling in me a love of learning and dedication to achieving my goals, thank you to my parents, Rick and Laura Flagg. Without their unwavering patience, emotional and financial support, and readiness to act as surrogate dog parents, I would not have succeeded in this accomplishment.

Thanks to Yves Marchand for his willingness to contribute to my scholarship and, along with Romain Meffre, for inspiring both my writing and my own artistic pursuits with their work.
INTRODUCTION

A Tradition of Attention to Ruins

Two young men, both from suburbs of Paris, met in 2002 in an Internet chat room devoted to the topic of ruins. Yves Marchand (b. 1981) and Romain Meffre (b. 1987) soon began exploring abandoned structures together and documenting their discoveries. Since 2005, the two have produced a large portfolio of photographs made from urban ruins in the United States, Japan, and Europe. This collaboration has led to the production of *The Ruins of Detroit* (Steidl, 2010), a book of photographs of Detroit’s abandoned buildings (automobile factories, schools, police stations, homes, etc.); *Gunkanjima* (Steidl, 2013), a book examining an abandoned Japanese coal mining island; and “Theaters,” a collection-in-progress of photographs of the remains of early twentieth-century American cinemas and stage theaters, a selection of which is posted on the artists’ website.¹

Marchand and Meffre express a philosophical basis for their attention to ruins:

We don't consider ruins as a dead thing. If it still exists, there is a way to react and make things out of them. The state of ruins is really poetic, Michigan train station for instance is even more iconic as a ruins than if it was clean and painted white. Of course what was the most depressing was the loss of the architecture and history, but also [of the] things that [were] left inside [. . .]²

The photographers profess an interest in the manner in which the architecture of an era speaks to the values of departed societies as well as the ways in which structures relate to their

¹ http://marchandmeffre.com. A fourth group of images, of East German factory buildings, is reproduced alongside an interview with Marchand and Meffre on the Galerie-Photo website, but the artists do not discuss this body of work on their own website, nor exhibit it in solo exhibitions, if at all. “Yves Marchand et Romain Meffre,” Galerie-Photo, http://www.galerie-photo.com/yves-marchand-romain-meffre.html (accessed March 5, 2014).
² This quotation was taken from an unpublished interview of Marchand and Meffre by an unknown interviewer. Marchand provided the interview document via email on November 3, 2013. Further inquiry has not yielded a response. All correspondence with and documents provided to me by the artists were composed in English.
surroundings after having been left to nature’s devices. Thus, many of their photographs depict wide scenes of architectural interiors and exteriors. It is this emphasis on broad views of open spaces, therefore, that makes Marchand and Meffre’s relatively fewer but more sensitively photographed images of personal objects and belongings all the more melancholic. Despite a straightforward approach to photographing their subjects, Marchand and Meffre establish a profound sense of nostalgia in their images through the strategic repetition of certain motifs. It is my contention that Marchand and Meffre eschew sociopolitical concerns in their photographs and instead create poignant testimonials to the past through an emphasis on human artifacts as well as iconic references to the passing of time. Throughout their body of work, the two photographers succeed in imparting their philosophical objectives relating to the life cycles of ruins and societies through a strictly documentary mode of photographing.

Because Marchand and Meffre’s three bodies of work evolved during overlapping periods in the last decade, the portfolios establish a consistent and characteristic pictorial style. The pair traveled overseas to each of their sites of interest a number of times over several years in order to compile each collection. I have identified three primary modes of depiction present in Marchand and Meffre’s body of photographs. The first, sweeping views of crumbling interiors in landscape orientation, is the grandest in effect and most prevalent throughout their portfolio. Such photographs tend to emphasize the surfaces and textures in the scenes. Another style is a deadpan, somewhat Becher-esque representation of abandoned or decaying structures from a frontal vantage point. The third style of composition is the more personal treatment of objects in private spaces such as offices and residences. These usually have portrait orientation, convey

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3 Bernd Becher (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (b. 1934) are known for their straightforward depictions of industrial archetypes such as coal bunkers, water towers, and silos. Their dedication to a precisely and consistently framed image has made the almost formulaic deadpan composition a style widely attributed to couple.
sensitivity to personal items such as kitchen utensils and children’s toys, and express grief and loss. I contend that the occurrence of the third type—depictions of objects that signal the former presence and conversely the contemporaneous absence of people—is made more poignant by the pervasiveness of the images falling into the first and second categories. The extensive documentation of ruined and abandoned buildings within a given area results in a conceptual landscape that lends in part to a philosophical component to Marchand and Meffre’s method. The construction of a documentary portfolio without explicit correlations between images yields the creation within the viewer’s mind of a hypothetical landscape that is based in reality but intrinsically imagined.

Marchand and Meffre use a large-format Shen Hao view camera with 4 x 5-inch color film. The bulky and cumbersome equipment and slow materials are themselves outmoded technologies that recall traditional processes seldom used today. Because they produce large-format negatives, Marchand and Meffre are subsequently able to print their photographs at a larger scale without losing any of the images’ fine detail. By reproducing them at such a size, the artists enhance the dramatic impact of both the broad scenes of decay and the close-up images of personal objects. The distance view required to observe these photographs also has philosophical implications. Large-scale prints have the potential to dominate the viewer’s frame of vision but the nature of representative images is to be fundamentally unattainable. The audience may observe the subject depicted but never directly consume it or be present to it.

Marchand and Meffre’s portfolio, both technically masterful and compositionally sophisticated, is a case study of an aesthetic that is gaining popularity internationally with both viewers and practitioners of contemporary photography. *Beauty in Decay: Urbex* (2011),

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4 Marchand and Meffre currently produce most of their prints at 95 x 120 cm (approximately 37 x 47 inches) and 150 x 190 cm (approximately 59 x 75 inches).
compiled by RomanyWG, details the motivations and trends of the popular cultural phenomenon in recent years of urban exploration, or “urbex.” According to Patrick Potter, many practitioners of urban decay photography produce such images simply to record their exploration. The controversy surrounding such practices is described by journalist Sean O’Hagan: “This pictorial sub-genre—decay rendered formally beautiful—has prompted some critics to lament the rise of ‘ruin porn,’ [but to do so] is, in some way, to try to ignore the end-of-empire romance of the place in all its ghostly grandeur and emptiness.” Catherine Fox, chief arts critic for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, also expounded upon the contention pertaining to urban decay photography: “Though the tension between the beauty of [the] photographs and their depressing subject matter is critical to their impact, one could criticize them for aestheticizing tragedy. This is always an issue with art about terrible things, of course, and, as a third-generation Detroiter, I’m particularly sensitive to the idea of the city’s misery as delectation.” In contrast to what O’Hagan and Fox describe as the perceived shortcomings of “ruin porn”—aestheticization lacking in theoretical depth—Marchand and Meffre’s photographs provide moving philosophical interpretations of abandoned spaces, both private and public.

Fine art establishments on three continents have exhibited all three of Marchand and Meffre’s major bodies of work. Their photographs have appeared in solo exhibitions in Europe at the Polka Galerie, Galerie Wanted, Cinéma du Panthéon, Naço Galerie, and Galerie Kennory.

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5 RomanyWG is the pseudonym of Jeremy Gibbs (b. 1955), “urbex” photographer and publisher of two books on the topic of urban exploration: Beauty in Decay: Urbex (2011) and Burn After Reading (2012). Besides RomanyWG, some other photographers represented in Beauty in Decay are Timothy Neesam, Alexander Friedrich, Bertram Beyer, Martijn Zegwaard, Patrick Duhaze, Andre Govia, Matthias Haker, Dennis Gerbeckx, Paul Howes, ilja Hummel, Franck Losay, and Nils Eisfeld.
8 Catherine Fox, “Photographer Finds Art in Ruins of Motor City,” The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (April 30, 2010): 7D.
Kim in Paris; Galerie Edwynn Houk in Zurich; Fontana Fortuna Gallery in Amsterdam; the Wilmotte Gallery in London; Kühlaus in Berlin; Le Maillon in Strasbourg; Gun Gallery in Stockholm; and Point of View Gallery in New York, NY, in addition to several group exhibitions in Europe and one in Australia.


Marchand and Meffre are not the only photographers recording urban ruins for artistic purposes. Camilo José Vergara (b. 1944), Andrew Moore (b. 1957), and Mathew Merrett (b. 1960) are all contemporary photographers whose images of Detroit have gained them fame. Robert Polidori (b. 1951) is also a prolific photographer who primarily records domestic spaces around the world and who produced a remarkable body of images from the Chernobyl ruins. Contemporary artists practicing in other media also have adopted the theme of ruins in their

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work. Northern Kentucky native Hollis Hammonds (b. 1971), for instance, imagines post-apocalyptic scenes of destruction and decay—frequently at the hands of American consumerism—in her large-scale drawings. English film artist Tacita Dean (b. 1965) also focuses on the passage of time and urban change as themes in much of her work. As a topic of philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic fascination, ruins have become a subject of great interest in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art.

The attention to urban ruins in contemporary culture is widespread and multidisciplinary. For instance, the “Documents of Contemporary Art” series published Ruins in 2001, edited by Brian Dillon, a compilation of essays that includes passages from as far back in history as Denis Diderot’s (1713-1784) “Le Salon de 1767,” in which Diderot marvels at the perplexing and humbling effects of beholding ruins. Other noteworthy thinkers whose commentary on ruins Dillon included are sociologist, philosopher, and critic Georg Simmel (1858-1918); novelist Rose Macaulay (1881-1958); philosopher and social and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940); philosopher, sociologist, and art historian Georges Bataille (1897-1962); philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004); sculptor and land artist Robert Smithson (1938-1973); and sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). Dylan Trigg, in The Aesthetics of Decay (2006), examines the role of the modern ruin in his theoretical discourse regarding place and social progress. Trigg analyzes the modern ruin as a spatial context in which to situate a critique of social progress. Ruins of Modernity (2010) editors Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle suggest that European modernity was, in fact, shaped by attention to pre-modern ruins. Tim Edensor, in his Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality (2005), argues that society widely and improperly regards ruins as spaces of waste but that ruins instead should be
considered to be “endowed with meaning and function.” Relevant to Marchand and Meffre’s practice, too, is Edensor’s assertion that ruins are inherently engaged in the process of “becoming” and that urban, industrial ruin photographs are valuable for their ability to reveal and record the stages and temporalities of cities’ decay. Such books as these offer defenses of the urban decay aesthetic against the denigration of “ruin porn.”

Marchand and Meffre do not emerge purely as products of a contemporary social and aesthetic sensibility, however. These photographers are part of a long and rich historical framework of French photographic and artistic traditions as well as a larger Western culture of artistic influences. Art Informel, stemming from the ideas of scholars such as Bataille and Michel Tapié (1909-1987), places an emphasis on destruction, decay, the primitive, and memory and is closely related to the Art Brut movement spurred by artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) which encourages art-making based on the same principles. Marchand and Meffre’s aestheticization of the degraded structures they photograph likens their work additionally to the heavily impasto paintings of German Expressionist artist Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945).

Surrealist theory such as André Breton’s (1896-1966) urbane aesthetic of the ugly and surrealist photography by Brassaï (1899-1984) are also part of the tradition from which Marchand and Meffre emerge as artist-photographers. In Marchand and Meffre’s photographs (and in the environments they portray), urban ruins become assimilation. The photographers discuss the “inherent” representation of cultural values in the architecture that societies leave behind, thus equating the original structures to the eras in which they were erected and, in contrast, associating their current state with contemporaneous social conventions. Marchand and Meffre’s photographs, though documentary, can be viewed through a Surrealist lens to reveal

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11 Ibid., 116-17.
dreamlike, ghostly, or even nightmarish inferences. Accordingly, the photographers discuss the entanglement of dream and reality that is demonstrated in their images. Marchand and Meffre’s portfolio, by celebrating the aesthetics of ruins, enmeshes notions of memory and desire with the result being an uncanny nod to Surrealism.

Marchand and Meffre’s desire to record cities and spaces in an effort to preserve them can be likened to the documentary process of Parisian photographer and flaneur Eugène Atget (1857-1927), who in his time also used outmoded technology to make his photographs, and whose work the Surrealists embraced. Other historical city photographers such as André Kertész (1894-1985) come to mind in regard to the oblique angles which Marchand and Meffre so frequently use, as does Walker Evans (1903-1975) when considering the flatter, more deadpan approach that the contemporary pair often takes. Additionally, Marchand and Meffre’s attention to the materiality of spaces and layering of textures recalls the work of American Abstract Expressionist photographer Aaron Siskind (1903-1991). Finally, their emphasis on cycles and the rise and fall of empires recalls Thomas Cole’s (1801-1848) The Course of Empire (1833-1836), an allegorical series of five paintings depicting the perceived consequences of human interference in the natural landscape. The subject, style, and process developed throughout Marchand and Meffre’s body of work—one that is quite large given the artists’ young age—places the pair firmly within the context of American and European fine artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I discuss Marchand and Meffre’s compositional techniques as establishing feelings of nostalgia and melancholia in their photographs. Literary scholar Svetlana Boym (b. 1966) describes the philosophy of nostalgia in an entry in Atlas of Transformation (2011) as “a sentiment of loss and displacement” and “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has
never existed.” According to Boym, nostalgia is not in opposition to modernity (a subject that is fundamental to Marchand and Meffre’s practice) despite its common association with a remembered past: “Nostalgia is not merely an expression of local longing, but the result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into ‘local’ and ‘universal’ possible.”

Boym explains that nostalgia is a yearning not for a geographical place but actually for a different time which may be past, future, or imagined. Marchand and Meffre express a nostalgia for bygone eras through the isolation of particular motifs but do not necessarily yearn for their restoration. Instead they bear witness to the former prosperity of the ruins. Boym continues: “nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory,” whereas “melancholia [. . .] confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness.”

Marchand and Meffre profess a belief in a powerful correlation between individual human tendencies and the nature of societies. The impermanence demonstrated by ruins is, in their view, a representation of the predispositions of human nature. They write,

Permanence is a human concept. We think there is no such a difference between the individual behaviour and the making of a civilization. They’re both intimately related, there is just a difference of scale. Looking at someone is looking to the whole humanity.

Ruins are the end of ideas, whereas ideas are immaterial, ruins appears like the best metaphor we can not just look at, but even being physically touched and felt. [sic]

But as it’s nothing of a life form, ruins could also be conserved as the ideas they materialize or reused, unlike us except for what we left behind, our creations and ideas. In our human scale, buildings, the art, history and objects we produce are

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
the only things which have the appearance of permanence. Looking at ruins seems to prove the opposite.\textsuperscript{15}

To Marchand and Meffre, ruins are the remnants, the physical legacy, of the ideas and values of a particular society. Their photographs demonstrate the decay of matter, the impermanence inherent in that which we construct upon the earth.

In Chapter One, “The Ruins of Detroit (2010): Windows, Clocks, and Personal Belongings in Motor City,” I will give a brief history of Detroit’s automotive success and the industry’s subsequent collapse, followed by formal analyses of representative photographs from the book. I will demonstrate that rather than making a political or socioeconomic statement regarding the city of Detroit, Marchand and Meffre establish a more poetic demonstration through the use of particular motifs. I will analyze how the icons of the window and clock, which reoccur throughout the portfolio, as well as the inclusion of personal items and belongings, inform the reading of The Ruins of Detroit and speak to Marchand and Meffre’s professed interest in the passage of time and ephemerality of empires. I will argue that their use of iconography in The Ruins of Detroit serves to evoke melancholia in their photographs and lend to the feeling of nostalgia regarding the fall of Detroit.

In Chapter Two, “Gunkanjima (2013): Emblems of Modernity and Domestic Life on an Abandoned Japanese Coal Mining Island,” I will discuss Marchand and Meffre’s second book similarly. This second compilation by the artists documents a former coal mining island colony off the coast of Nagasaki. Meaning “Battleship Island,” Gunkanjima (formally Hashima) was abandoned in 1974 following the shift from coal to petroleum as the primary energy source in Japan. Unlike The Ruins of Detroit, Gunkanjima includes historical photographs, made by Chyuki Ito (1918-1992), of everyday activity during the colony’s mining heyday in the 1950s.

\textsuperscript{15} From an unpublished interview, provided by Marchand to me via email on November 3, 2013.
and 1960s. Marchand and Meffre pair historical photographs with their own images of the same locations post-abandonment in a poignant comparison that clearly conveys a sense of mourning for the disbanded community. Throughout Gunkanjima, the photographers include icons of modernity as well as indicators of domestic life in order to establish the familiar sense of nostalgia so prevalent throughout their work.

Chapter Three, “‘Theaters’ (2005-Present): Theatricality, Spectacle, and Transformation in Twentieth-Century Theaters,” details Marchand and Meffre’s currently ongoing portfolio, available on their website. “Theaters” is composed of photographs of converted and abandoned halls from the early twentieth century taken in various locations throughout the United States. Many have been repurposed since the 1960s, and others abandoned. “Theaters” is a continuing project, begun in 2005, that documents the afterlives of once-grandiose architectural structures which now serve far more mundane purposes because “TV, multiplexes, and urban crisis made them obsolete.”16 I examine Marchand and Meffre’s general pattern of prolifically portraying scenes of grand architectural spaces while emphasizing relatively fewer private spaces or objects indicative of previous human presence. I argue that this relatively sparse occurrence of personal items depicted throughout the artists’ practice increases their import in each of the three portfolios. In “Theaters,” Marchand and Meffre complicate the ideas of spectacle and theatricality embodied by the physical structures by examining their contemporary conditions.

Throughout their body of work, nowhere do Marchand and Meffre use props or alternative processing techniques in the production of their images. They never introduce foreign objects into the scenes they photograph, nor do they rearrange what is already present. At most, the pair may interfere by using a flashlight to illuminate dark rooms to make an

exposure. Although their photographs are evocative of notions of nostalgia for the passing of eras and melancholia for the loss of societies and cultures, their process of recording is straightforward. Throughout their practice, Marchand and Meffre manage to produce images that are simultaneously documentary in nature and philosophical in interpretation. The result is a body of work that seems to speak for itself: the spaces that Marchand and Meffre record—a city in decline, an abandoned island, and a series of remnants of modern entertainment culture—are at once straightforward, lasting relics of eras passed, and expressive, mournful testaments to what has been lost.

17 This information comes from an unpublished interview, provided by Marchand to me via email on November 3, 2013.
CHAPTER ONE

The Ruins of Detroit (2010):
Windows, Clocks, and Personal Belongings in Motor City

The Ruins of Detroit, published in 2010 by Steidl in Göttingen, Germany, features 186 full-color reproductions of Marchand and Meffre’s images. Printed onto the cloth cover is the photograph Michigan Central Station (ca. 2005-2009), the image wrapping around the edges of the binding so as to inhabit the entire rectangle. The book takes on the likeness of the iconic Detroit railroad landmark, one stained with graffiti and pockmarked by broken windowpanes (Fig. 1). Within the pages of The Ruins of Detroit are photographs featuring icons and recurring motifs that represent Detroit, Michigan as it was when Marchand and Meffre documented it between 2005 and 2009. In these images, Detroit’s ruins are represented in a straightforward, documentary fashion, but the subject matter on which Marchand and Meffre focus a number of their images instills the portfolio with a feeling of melancholia.

The Ruins of Detroit begins with a brief foreword by contemporary photographer Robert Polidori (b. 1951) and a longer historical introduction by Thomas J. Sugrue (b. 1962), Professor of History and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Following these two essays is Marchand and Meffre’s statement, which introduces the subsequent body of photographs. Throughout the publication, the images are largely grouped by location and frequently have accompanying text that gives contextual information regarding the historical circumstances of particular sites’ abandonment.18

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18 These texts are presumably also composed by Sugrue, although this is not explicitly stated. It can be assumed that Sugrue, an American, wrote his texts in English but that they were likely translated into the other languages of publication by staff employed by Steidl.
In his introduction, Sugrue, a prolific author on the subject of Detroit’s “urban crisis,” gives an account of the city’s industrial history, relating the events of its rise and fall from 1901 to 1983 as the global capital of automobile production. According to Sugrue, in the earliest decades of the twentieth century, Detroit was well-situated to take the lead in the assembly line mass manufacture of Henry Ford’s new Model T automobile for three reasons “its location (near raw materials), its centrality to the country’s most populous regions, and its good fortune.”¹⁹ As the world leader in production of the automobile—the most emblematic American icon of early twentieth-century modernity—Detroit quickly grew into a sprawling metropolis featuring the production and assembly buildings of influential industrial architect Albert Kahn (1869-1942) and the grand and ornamental skyscrapers constructed in a variety of architectural styles that demonstrated the wealth and opulence of the flourishing city of Detroit. Because of its enormous employment potential, Motor City attracted workers from all over the country. By 1920, Detroit boasted one of the four highest city populations in the country, and by its peak in the early 1950s, nearly two million people claimed residence in the city. During the first half of the century, Detroit represented to the entire country the manifestation of the American Dream: for many, employment by the automobile corporations in Detroit made possible the financial independence and comfortable lifestyle not widely available during the Great Depression.

Detroit’s prosperity, however, would prove to be short-lived. Beginning in the 1950s, a series of disinvestments on the part of the automobile industrial corporations resulted in manufacturers leaving Detroit in favor of more rural, less expensive locations. The motivations for such changes were various, including encouragement by the United States government to decentralize large cities for fear of nuclear attack, attempts by industry leaders to weaken trade

unions by reducing the size of the workforce, and the availability of cheaper labor in outlying communities resulting from the construction of highway systems (which, Sugrue notes, was “the direct effect of the rise of the automobile as Americans’ major form of transportation”). Over the following decades, Motor City suffered repeated blows to its financial security. Because of the aforementioned factors among others, Detroit lost around 140,000 manufacturing jobs between 1948 and 1963. In the 1970s and 1980s American automobile corporations suffered when the German and Japanese manufacturers made headway in the industry. The international oil crisis in 1974 led Chrysler to declare bankruptcy and destabilized Ford and General Motors’s market share. In the 1990s the American automobile industry seemed to regain some footing with the increased production of large trucks and SUVs, but subsequently suffered losses when oil prices in the U.S. rose again after 2004.

Detroit’s former optimism and subsequent fall is evidenced today by the remains of formerly active factory buildings and once-great works of architecture. The sturdy structures remain, with many neoclassical details recalling historical eras of intellectual and industrial prosperity, but they have suffered the whims of nature and trespassers. As Sugrue writes, “But despite vandalism, many of the grand factories remained standing—a reminder of their solidity. This was an architecture meant to endure the ravages of time.” It is these lasting structures which have attracted the attention of photographers in recent years.

Prolific fine art photographer and urban decay enthusiast Robert Polidori, who composed the first introduction to The Ruins of Detroit, himself photographed Detroit’s ruins some time before encountering Marchand and Meffre’s work. Polidori explains that his own interest in

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20 Ibid., 12.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 13.
Detroit was spurred by José Camilo Vergara’s photographic book, *American Ruins* (2003), in which Vergara documented the ruins of American cities in multiple photographic sequences taken in various locations over several years. Although Polidori was dissatisfied with his own photographs of the city, his effort ultimately attracted him all the more to Marchand and Meffre’s work when he first met the young artists in 2007.\(^{23}\) Polidori represents a thread linking a number of contemporary photographers of Detroit’s ruins. One, Andrew Moore, told Polidori about the work of Marchand and Meffre. Coincidentally, Moore’s book of photographs of Detroit’s ruins, *Detroit Disassembled* (2010), was released around the same time as was *The Ruins of Detroit*, resulting in the two publications garnering a great deal of press together in the United States. *New York Times* journalist Holly Brubach compared the two publications in her review, “Ruin With a View,” that year. In Brubach’s opinion, while both portfolios find beauty in decay, Moore’s depiction of Detroit is optimistic, including people in his images and signifying “an occasion to devise a new urban paradigm,” whereas she describes Marchand and Meffre’s collection as bleak and “a case of nature reclaiming land the city appropriated, slowly erasing these remaining vestiges of a failed metropolis.”\(^{24}\)

Marchand and Meffre have emerged as photographers of Detroit’s ruins amidst a context of predecessors and contemporaries in addition to Vergara, Polidori, and Moore. This interconnected community of artists represents only one thread, a tiny percentage, of those who, since the 1990s, have explored the haunting and apparently fascinating physical result of Detroit’s financial fall. The city’s abandoned structures have also drawn the attention of urban decay photographer Mathew Merrett. In the few Detroit images available for viewing on his professional website, it is evident that, like Moore, Merrett photographed many of the same

\(^{23}\) Robert Polidori, “Foreword,” in Marchand and Meffre, 7.

locations as did Marchand and Meffre. Unlike the Frenchmen, however, Merrett produced more than half of his images in black and white and frequently used unconventional vantage points such as from the floor looking directly upward to a vaulted ceiling, so that overall his collection takes on a rather romanticized view of Detroit’s condition in abandonment in comparison with Marchand and Meffre’s more pragmatic approach.

Detroit’s ruins have been the object of much political, social, and artistic discussion over the last several decades. Given the controversy surrounding ruin photography and the “ruin porn” stigma associated with it, a great deal of art and documentary photography in Detroit has been defamed by critics who see such images as exploitative and detrimental to the city’s reputation. Rather than being critical of Detroit or taking advantage of the city’s industrial collapse, however, Marchand and Meffre are interested in the city for its embodiment of that which draws them to ruins generally: the ephemeral nature of the human condition. “We've always been fascinated with ruins, there was nowhere else [where] the ruins has such an ampleur and their fall was so strongly linked to their own history. Detroit is probably the most important city of the XXth century.” Through the use of such icons as the window and the clock as well as attention to human artifacts and personal belongings, Marchand and Meffre created a portfolio that mourns the financial failure of the Detroit automotive empire and emphasizes the humanity of those who once inhabited these now-empty spaces.

Marchand and Meffre discuss their interest in the cerebral rather than the political in their introduction to The Ruins of Detroit:

26 Fox, “Photographer Finds Art in Ruins of Motor City.”
27 From an unpublished interview, provided by Marchand to me via email on November 3, 2013.
28 According to Marchand in email correspondence to me on December 4, 2013, their published statements were written partly in English by the artists and edited by a third, unnamed person. Copyright information for The Ruins of Detroit would suggest that for this publication the statement was edited by Sébastien de Villèle.
The state of ruin is essentially a temporary situation that happens at some point, the volatile result of a change of era and the fall of empires. Ruins are a fantastic land where one no longer knows whether reality slips into dream or whether, on the contrary, dream makes a brutal return into the most violent of realities. Therefore they appear to be a natural and sublime demonstration of our human destinies and of their paradoxes, a dramatisation of our creative and self-destructive vanities. A decisive moment in which one could suddenly catch a glimpse of his condition past, present and future at once.  

Instead of emphasizing the sociopolitical implications of Detroit’s empty structures, Marchand and Meffre state that their goal in making these photographs is to examine universal human themes rather than economic ones. They continue:

In our view, no other place on earth symbolized this state of things more than the city of Detroit. True “capital of the twentieth century”, [sic] Detroit has literally created, produced and manufactured our modern world, creating a logic that has eventually annihilated, destroyed the city itself. We learn about this dazzling rise and fall through the remains of that contemporary Pompeii, with all the archetypal buildings of an American city in a state of mummification. In Motor City, ruins are no longer an isolated and anecdotal element, but become a logical part, a natural component of the landscape.

Here the two artists explain that rather than making a photographic criticism of capitalism using Detroit as the example, their photographs stem from a preoccupation with the way in which ruins demonstrate the evolution of societies. For Marchand and Meffre, Detroit is not necessarily a problem which could or should have been avoided, but an inevitability of human nature.

Marchand and Meffre have a decidedly philosophical statement regarding their impetus to record ruins. They do not assign any particular emotion to their work. However, their subject matter—and in fact the word they use to describe it, “ruins”—as well as their manner of photographing, all evoke a sense of melancholia. Adding to these are the particular motifs that recur throughout this portfolio. Marchand and Meffre repeat specific imagery and focus on the

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29 Marchand and Meffre, The Ruins of Detroit, 16.
30 Ibid.
materiality of the spaces they explore. They also place an emphasis on human artifacts in order to convey a sensitivity to the loss in Detroit.

I will discuss images of windows and clocks as representative examples or case studies of primary motifs that Marchand and Meffre use to instill their portfolio with symbolic meaning. Both icons pose as philosophical references to linear time and natural cycles and as such are appropriate motifs for representing changes in eras and falls of empires. On the page facing Marchand and Meffre’s statement for *The Ruins of Detroit is Packard Motor Plant* (ca. 2005-2009), a photograph made from inside the manufacturing building, through an upper-floor window overlooking abandoned factories (Fig. 2). Cracked and yellowed with rust, the panes of the foreground window do not appear to be of glass, but look torn and splintered like an aged animal hide. The window’s brown haze is punctuated by gaps through which we see that the nearest building is also derelict, with sagging window frames and broken and missing glass. Raking sunlight casts shadows like penitentiary bars across the outside structure’s rubble-strewn floors, visible through its vacant, gaping window frames. In the background are innumerable gray and brown buildings, presumably also carcasses of once-flourishing industries, and a water tower that one can’t help but imagine has gone dry. The cracks in the window through which we view this dreary landscape meander across the composition, vein-like, obscuring our view of the city outside while simultaneously creating their own irregular frames around and through pieces of what lies beyond. The entirety of the composition is delineated and divided by the thick black line of the window frame. The image’s overall tone is bleak, somber, and uninviting.

Windows typically represent not only literal portals but symbolic gateways to truth or enlightenment. Symbologist Juan Eduardo Cirlot (1916-1973) cites the icon of the window as being expressive of possibility, having rational and terrestrial implications, and symbolizing
consciousness, “especially when it is located at the top of a tower.” Marchand and Meffre’s Packard plant window emphasizes the physicality and materiality of the window itself as well as the desolation of that which is revealed through it. Whereas a window is not typically acknowledged as a material barrier—rather, its solidness is overlooked for the literal and metaphorical disclosure it allows—this cracked, stained, and partially missing window does just the opposite, obscuring rather than revealing, and imparting a grimy veil over that which it exposes. Additionally, this image appears facing Marchand and Meffre’s introduction, a pairing which reinforces upon both the text and the image the metaphor to which the photographers attest the ephemerality of eras and the paradoxical duality of dream and reality. In this case, either interpretation—of the image as dream or as reality—is pessimistic.

The position of the camera and therefore necessarily the photographers within the building, peering outward, situates Marchand and Meffre physically inside the plant building, within the ruin. The composition they have chosen to pair with their statement visually establishes the artists as temporary occupants or inhabitants of the ruin rather than as outsiders merely observing Detroit’s condition. Symbolically, the artists thus position themselves in congruence with the ruined plant building. This opposes the possible interpretation of the Frenchmen’s attention as being toward the political and economic consequences of capitalism from an outsider’s perspective. Instead, we should understand Marchand and Meffre’s interest as being in accordance with their statement: the pair is interested in socioeconomic concerns only inasmuch as they are the side effects of human social cycles—of “a change of era and the fall of empires”—and not as the primary force behind their attention to the ruins of Detroit. Despite the fact that the photograph is composed in a straightforward manner with no manipulation,

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Marchand and Meffre’s use of compositional techniques impart poetic meaning to the image. The combination of dreary subject matter with the photographers’ sensitivity to the psychological impact of symbols and framing methods creates a distinctly despondent tone in *Packard Motors Plant*.

In many other photographs, the window plays an important formal role in addition to its metaphorical one. For instance, in *Wurlitzer Building* (ca. 2005-2009), a single opening—a large, four-paned window—punctuates the geometric, angular composition of a stairwell (Fig. 3). Here we observe many signs of dereliction: peeling paint, graffiti on the wall, and dust and debris piled in a corner. In the center of the left side of the frame, however, a window admits the only source of light, illuminating the space and throwing shadows across the stairs. The shape, which is lit from behind by natural light, provides the composition with a heavy area of highlight in an otherwise dark and potentially ominous environment. By casting light across the scene, the window allows us to perceive the materiality of the space: the patterns and textures of the curling paint on the walls and ceiling, the grime coating the floors, and the brittleness of the aged plastic, paper, and a calendar discarded in the corner. The architecture itself emphasizes the shape of the window: the stairs on the right, leading upward to the floor above, bracket the window in a chevron shape and frame the bright lens-distorted rectangle. The window’s top, left, and bottom edges are echoed by the ceiling, pipes, and baseboard. Given the obtuse angle of the wall to the camera, the parallel lines where the wall meets the ceiling and floor appear to angle toward one another as they approach the “V” of the stairs. The entirety of the composition forms the shape of a heavy arrow, pointing the viewer toward the next pages of the book. Despite this visual guide, the boldly lit window on the left stabilizes the image. Although the bright sunlight and, presumably, a film on the glass prevent us from viewing what is on the outside, the window
provides a balance to the composition, keeping our attention by weighting the left side of the photograph and lending variation to the consuming dark values to which the shadowy space is susceptible. A wall calendar lies open on the floor, a visual reminder of the years that have passed. This indicator of time gone by imparts a feeling of melancholia in an otherwise visually dynamic image. The calendar page also contributes an element of surrealism with dual “freezing” of time—by the building’s abandonment and by the camera.

In the case of Wurlitzer Building—and, I would argue, in the majority of photographs of windows throughout the collection (although it seems as though each window has different philosophical and symbolic implications)—the metaphorical connotations of the window are by no means lost to its formal devices. As a portal, this particular one has rather complicated inferences. Whereas we understand windows visually as revealers of truth, this one shows very little. In fact, the only content discernible on the other side of the pane is the indistinct shadow of a chain link fence. Rather than embodying enlightenment, this window provides no visual information regarding the situation outside the photographic space, and that which it does disclose—the fence—is seen as denoting confinement and limitation. On the other hand, the window lends light to the composition and although it is unclear what is on the outside, the bright highlight may denote optimism, possibility, and expansion outside the dereliction of the metal stairwell. Additionally, the window makes visible the materiality of the scene; the textures, colors, and patterns have aesthetic merit of their own. However, based on the evidence found in the rest of Marchand and Meffre’s collection, what is revealed by the window in Wurlitzer Building stands as a representative of the poor state of the city as a whole. It is this

32 Of the 186 images reproduced in the book, more than 140 depict windows within the composition to some end, whether the icon is used explicitly as a compositional or symbolic device or it is simply present as a feature punctuating the exterior of a commercial building or an abandoned home.
aestheticism which the critics of urban decay photography decry—the making of appealing images out of tragic subjects. Marchand and Meffre’s emphasis on the window, however, lends an awareness of loss to the portfolio that underscores their poetic intentions regarding Detroit’s ruins rather than merely materialistic ones.

A different and more problematic use of windows can be seen in 9th Floor, Metropolitan Building (ca. 2005-2009), in which we observe an interior doorframe once flanked by windows that are now gone but whose frames remain and whose surrounding structure has collapsed (Fig. 4). Rather than imparting information from outside to inside, these windows possess no capacity for revealing any reality outside the depicted environment. Rather, they exist within one interior setting—and here I admit that “exist” is perhaps generous as now only the frames remain, and even their preservation is contingent upon the enduring balance of the crumbling cement blocks around them—and disclose the situation within: the rubble remaining from a past era.

These foreground windows impart no light upon the scene. There is little of the surrounding environment that cannot be understood without them; the walls that they would punctuate no longer exist, rendering the windows useless to providing information about what lies on the other side. The door and window structures themselves act as the only barriers now, so that the window frames’ presence is fundamentally more an obstruction than a portal. These sagging oblongs stand independently in the middle of one continuous scene of decay, acting purely as frames to the dereliction. If these windows serve as diviners of reality, it is only by emphasizing segments of what exists within the same space. As portals, though, these windows do not present the viewer with any ambiguity regarding the reality or “truth” of the outside scene; the space visible on the other side presents the same situation as that which is seen in the foreground.
There is a window to the exterior present in 9th Floor, Metropolitan Building, however, in the background of the photograph and visible through the foreground window frame on the right. This window, like the one featured in Wurlitzer Building, provides natural light to the background of the scene, literally illuminating the reality beyond the foreground window frame that, without it, we would not be able to discern. In 9th Floor, Metropolitan Building, it is this background portal which sheds light on the environment. Together the foreground and background windows reveal and emphasize the remnants of the Metropolitan Building’s interior, shedding light on the years of crumbling of surfaces and industries, of Detroit’s physical structures and its societal ones.

The window appears in some fashion in virtually all of the photographs in The Ruins of Detroit. I argue that in many of the images that do not specifically feature windows, we understand the source of light in the compositions to be an exterior window that exists outside the photographic frame. In this way, the icon permeates the collection so thoroughly that we recognize windows to be present in many cases even when they are not explicitly depicted in the image. The repetition of portals not only within individual photographs but from one image to the next, seemingly interminable, becomes a motif within the collection and adds to the weight of its symbolic nature in Marchand and Meffre’s portfolio. If the window serves as a portal to truth, then the thousands of broken, sagging, vandalized, splintered windows, or even empty frames depicted in the pages of The Ruins of Detroit disclose a difficult reality: that Motor City as it once existed and flourished is now lost. The physical remnants act now as reminders of the formerly prosperous city that stand in juxtaposition to the memories of their once-productive selves.
Marchand and Meffre’s interest in ruins as they describe it can be considered to be two-part: first in the “change of era” and second in “the fall of empires.” Their use of the window as a motif serves as a visual reference to the fall of empires, both in terms of the physical conditions of the thousands of windows depicted—broken, sagging, and collapsed into rubble—and for their symbolic function as diviners of truth regarding the cycles they ascribe to human nature. Marchand and Meffre make use of another icon, the clock, which calls to mind the notion of the passage of time—of the change of an era.

Clock faces appear only briefly in the portfolio, certainly far less pervasively than do windows, but their presence palpably conveys the notion of time to which Marchand and Meffre are so sensitive throughout their process. About halfway through The Ruins of Detroit we encounter a series of photographs of Cass Technical High School which, according to the accompanying text, was once the largest technical high school in the country and in 2005 left its original facilities and moved into new premises. “The now empty original building remains as an ephemeral envelope, and offers the disturbing vision of a disposable product, used and then thrown away.”33 These words demonstrate an attention to the philosophical implications of “Cass Tech’s” relocation rather than quantifiable social and political data. Instead, Marchand and Meffre emphasize the more theoretical notions of ephemerality and disposability. In an interview, the photographers expand upon this concept:

The most distressing pictures we made were probably those from the schools and libraries full of books, because even if you know the context, you really don't get why it has been left like that and it says a lot about the loss of culture, deseducation and social waste. This is the great paradox of those ruins, [they] were not empty but full of objects, it's like consumerism being applied to a whole building, to a whole city, it's a kind of industrial logic of replacement/erasurement/abandonment. Once a building is useless as there is a new one in the suburbs or even just next to

33 Marchand and Meffre, 94.
it, you just throw away the old one, like a product. It’s a kind of misery within the abundance and that’s what is really troubling. [sic]34

Their words demonstrate unease on the part of the artists regarding the ability of populations to discard material objects upon exodus. Accordingly, their photographs demonstrate the staggering physical evidence of those who left not long ago. The presence of the clock throughout Cass Technical High School does nothing to indicate the duration for which such objects have endured. Rather, the icon of time simply stands to silently bear witness during the intervening years.

The clock face appears in four separate photographs taken in Cass Tech classrooms. The images are grouped together in the book on four consecutive pages. Here I will discuss them in the order in which they are reproduced in *The Ruins of Detroit*. In each of the images, the clock is mounted on a classroom wall, evidently having once operated on the building’s electricity—all of the school clocks’ hands are frozen within a few minutes of 3:45, an indication that the building’s power was turned off when the institute vacated it, thus pausing the hands’ rotations all at once. The first three clock photographs include the rooms in which they reside. The combined effect is jarring, for despite the fact the Cass Tech simply relocated its premises as opposed to having shut down, it appears as though much of the equipment and materials used for lessons was left behind. What remains seems to attest to a situation of Chernobyl-esque frenzied abandonment of the place. In each of the four photographs, the clock serves to remind us of the time passed since the rooms were abandoned, still full.

In the first such image, *Physics Classroom, Cass Technical High School* (ca. 2005-2009), more than a dozen classroom desks remain in three haphazard rows, only a few out of line or

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34 From an unpublished interview, provided by Marchand to me via email on November 3, 2013.
overturned (Fig. 5). A cupboard door stands open. A dozen or so books stand in small stacks alongside an empty drawer on the teacher’s desk. The front wall displays a periodic table of elements, a poster concerning atom sizes, a projector screen, and an assortment of other signs and notices above a long chalkboard. The only telltale signs of abandonment are the smattering of debris on the floor and desks and paint peeling from the walls and ceiling. The room is in disarray but it certainly does not have the upheaval that is characteristic in many of the other photographs throughout *The Ruins of Detroit*. Most other interior spaces show evidence of having been vandalized or else completely emptied by their former inhabitants and left to crumble. This room, however, does not indicate either; rather, it is as though it was simply vacated, its belongings left in their places. The objects that remain are signs of those who once used them. On the wall to the right, the clock stands sentinel, marking the time but not the date at which these items were left behind for good.

The situation is somewhat different in *Jewelry Classroom, Cass Technical High School* (ca. 2005-2009). Here, we see papers, manila envelopes, dust, and detritus scattered everywhere (Fig. 6). An unpainted wooden workbench in the foreground is skewed from its original position in line; dozens of workbench drawers throughout the room and a cabinet against the back wall gape open, doubtless having been ransacked; paint peels from walls, columns, and the ceiling. The image presents us with copious evidence of vandalism and of months or years passed. And yet, on a work table in the foreground, we see a rainbow of pots of paint left open, as though their handler has just stepped away. In this room two clocks face the viewer on the opposite wall: one, school-issued, electric, and frozen at 3:43; the other faceless, mounted on the chalkboard below, its hands reading approximately 1:16. As opposed to the electric school clock, this mysteriously blank one presumably did not stop keeping time when the building’s
power was turned off; it may have continued ticking for hours, weeks, or perhaps months. In this way the photograph conveys a commingling between the notions of time frozen, represented by the electric clock, and of time passed, symbolized by the faceless one. This doubling of the clock icon indicates the progression of the degradation of the Cass Tech building from the time when it was abandoned until Marchand and Meffre witnessed and recorded it. The presence of those who passed through this room during that time is palpable, from the persons who initially used and subsequently evacuated the classroom to those who demolished its contents. This is the nature of ruin photography: to capture the evidence of a space’s decay and change in state from the moment of its desertion until its documentation. Marchand and Meffre’s use of the clock icon makes this quality tangible and reiterates the melancholia in the images.

The third photograph featuring a clock, *Biology Classroom, Cass Technical High School* (ca. 2005-2009), contains little visual evidence to support the notion of frozen time. Instead, it depicts a scene suggestive of action, of vandalism, and of materiality. With scores of cabinets and drawers left hanging open and glass vessels overturned or shattered everywhere, it is quite apparent that this room is no longer as it was when Cass Tech vacated it (Fig. 7). *Biology Classroom* appears less like a scene of sudden evacuation and more like the aftermath of an earthquake. The curling paint in this classroom more than any other suggests that a great deal of time has passed since it was used. A husk of peeling paint partially obscures the face of the clock that presumably witnessed the destruction and yet gives the viewer no indication regarding the series of events that caused it. In Cass Technical High School, this comparison seems appropriate. In each of the classrooms depicted, a significant period of time has elapsed, over

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which, in all cases, a great deal of change has occurred. And in every classroom the clock remained, steadfastly, patiently, symbolizing time and yet no longer measuring it.

This image in particular speaks to Marchand and Meffre’s sentiment regarding “ephemerality and disposability.” It is curious that the school seemingly left behind much or all of the classroom materials as well as equipment and furniture. The artists describe the building as “an ephemeral envelope,” referring to its change in role resultant in the degradation of its contents. The building’s now-wasted capacity and assets, having been rejected by its former inhabitants, are left to decompose, discarded and disposable. The three classroom photographs together illustrate the concept of disposability and use the clock as an icon to represent the time lapsed. Marchand and Meffre seem to be mourning the rejection of the building and its contents by recording the degraded spaces and materials left behind.

The fourth and final clock represented in *The Ruins of Detroit is Melted Clock, Cass Technical High School* (ca. 2005-2009). Rather than photographing an entire room, Marchand and Meffre here show only the half-yellowed clock face surrounded by bark-like paint sloughing off cement walls (Fig. 8). The paint peels away in layers, revealing sections of robin’s egg blue beneath the overall gray. The clock’s hands are intact but halted, its face having melted and partially formed around them. What remains of the face is distorted and misshapen, an uncanny reminder of Salvador Dali’s (1904-1989) surrealist paintings of melted, sagging clocks such as *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Indeed, the portfolio as a whole conveys a surrealist sense of ephemerality and time, figuratively paused and yet still passing. This photograph, lacking in physical depth, emphasizes materiality rather than space and gives a blatant indication of the relationship of the abandoned environments to time passed.
The nature of a photograph is to arrest a fragment of a second, a slice of time. That Cass Tech’s clocks stopped together signals a definitive moment of abandonment and establishes for the viewer a definite sense that these clocks, although frozen by the photographic medium, had already halted in real time. In addition to this attention to the moment at which time “stopped,” the icon of the clock itself also visually reminds us simply of the concept of time passed and of the change of era in which the photographers are so interested in their pursuit of ruins. In their poetic way, Marchand and Meffre use the clock icon to emphasize their interest in the ephemerality associated with the passage of time, the matter that degraded throughout that duration, and the people who passed through, whose former presence is evident but who are no longer visible.

In addition to the window and the clock, the element that instills the most poignant sense of loss throughout Marchand and Meffre’s photographs in The Ruins of Detroit is the motif of human artifacts and personal belongings visible in the images. As so many of the settings that the artists photographed were once vast spaces used for congregations of people and personal ones of living and working, evidence of human presence is everywhere throughout The Ruins of Detroit. In each such instance, the items pictured indicate people having been present within the spaces before they abandoned them. In many cases, the evidence also distinctly suggests human interference in the environments following the building’s vacancy. Concerning both populaces—those who left and those who came after—Marchand and Meffre record the remnants of their having been with profound compassion.

One such image, Cathedral Manor Apartments (ca. 2005-2009), captures a demolished apartment strewn with debris and belongings, many of them children’s toys (Fig. 9). A gray fabric sofa stands at an angle on the right amid piles of dust and rubble, its seat cushions
nowhere to be seen. Visible amongst the heaps of grime and garbage on the floor are a plush Bugs Bunny, a stuffed alligator, and a plastic puzzle piece. Other variously colored plastic items also appear to be parts of children’s playthings. A box spring leans discarded against a wall and out of the photographic frame on the left. The scene resembles the aftermath of a tornado. Here, a window allows light into the room, literally illuminating the wreckage and imparting a metaphorical clarity. The situation is somber, but the cool, bright sunlight streaming in through the window conveys a matter-of-factness that may be suggestive of optimism, or at least of pragmatic acceptance. Still, the personal belongings and the destruction of what was obviously a home environment convey a certain pathos that is less palpable in the more public spaces that Marchand and Meffre recorded. This demonstration of a home life now mysteriously vacant helps to illustrate the sense of loss that the photographers reiterate throughout The Ruins of Detroit. The inclusion of the window, however, allows for a reading of this image as being indicative of the natural change of eras of which Marchand and Meffre wrote.

Sets of police officers’ clothing are depicted in Locker Room, Highland Park Police Station (ca. 2005-2009) (Fig. 10). In this close-up photograph, uniform jackets remain on rusty hangers on an apparently fallen closet rod. Two sleeves are prominently displayed, boasting the department shield badge, one featuring a double chevron rank insignia. Images such as this resemble movie stills and can appear constructed rather than found. This photograph brings to the viewer’s consciousness the former presence of people—of public servants—and necessarily also their absence in the present. Whereas the economic failure of the municipality—which is described in the text of the book—is a distinctly sociopolitical concern, the image is an emotional one lacking in signs of political agendas. Marchand and Meffre merely observe and record, their pictorial tone melancholic rather than accusatory.
Aside from personal belongings left behind, Marchand and Meffre also make use of physical and singular human artifacts to demonstrate the former presence of *individuals*, as opposed to the more general concept of populations of people. While in the former police department, the pair made *Evidence Room, Highland Park Police Station* (ca. 2005-2009), a document of a rusty desk and filing drawers piled with stained, corroded, and otherwise weathered items of police evidence (Fig. 11). Such objects include a television set, a gas mask, a baseball bat, a hammer, a set of keys, a medical specimen cup, a white shirt, numerous knives, a handful of shell casings, two Michigan license plates, a coffee can, and drawer upon drawer of filed evidence tags. Items such as these call to mind the fact that they were used by, and in many cases against, individual people. Objects in particular that denote violence evoke the mortality of those whose former presence is now felt more palpably by their absence in this photograph.

*Evidence Room, Highland Park Police Station* calls into question Marchand and Meffre’s approach because of its peculiar stagy quality. The seemingly careful arrangement of the evidence tag propped up on the open drawer on the right, conspicuous display of so many types of weapons and artifacts on the desk and spilling out of drawers, and distinct evidence of rummaging but lack of real destruction all call into question the legitimacy of this supposedly unaltered composition. The baseball bat propped up against the desk reinforces this notion of theatricality in an uncanny likeness to the perennially discussed *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg* (1863), in which photographer Alexander Gardner (1821-1882) was later revealed to have moved the corpse of the dead soldier, turned his face toward the camera for emotional effect, and propped his own rifle against the trench wall. *Evidence Room, Highland Park Police Station* serves as a reminder of the controversy inherent in documentary photography—that its
objectiveness can never be entirely trusted and that the involvement of the human hand in
decisions of subject placement and framing necessarily establishes biases.

Other images of police evidence, including *Benjamin Atkins’ Evidence, Highland Park
Police Station* (ca. 2005-2009), of a vial of blood of notorious serial killer Benjamin Atkins
(1968-1997), depict human artifacts that act as physical and biological signifiers of the
individuals who once inhabited Detroit’s now-empty spaces (Fig. 12). Another such artifact can
be seen in *20th Floor Dentist Cabinet, Broderick Tower* (ca. 2005-2009). In this photograph of a
former dentist’s office, plaster casts of patients’ teeth and jaws litter the floor and countertops of
the small examination room (Fig. 13). These casts, specific to the patient, can be likened to the
police station evidence for their forensic and biological connotations of singularity and
identification. Like the vials of blood and fingerprints on file, these abandoned imprints form
direct links between the camera and the individuals from whom they originated. Throughout *The
Ruins of Detroit*, Marchand and Meffre use human artifacts and belongings to forge connections
between the viewer and the absent human subjects of their photographs. Despite the extreme
variety in the types of objects recorded, the result is a documentary acknowledgement of the
people whose present situations cannot be known.

Throughout the 186 photographs comprising *The Ruins of Detroit*, Marchand and Meffre
demonstrate the distinct materiality of the spaces. Dust and grit coat surfaces like ash, piling in
corners and hanging suspended in the sunlight. Paint peels away from structures like shedding
skin. Everywhere we see the stuff of decay, of spaces uninhabited and defaced. This material
texture occurs pervasively throughout the pages of *The Ruins of Detroit*, adding to the
melancholia of the collection. The dust also lends to a sense of quiet and solitude, further
enhancing the concepts of abandonment and time passed. The presence of debris and sloughing
surfaces calls to mind both violence and stillness, the fall of the empires that once resided and the change of eras from then until now. This demonstration of materiality in Marchand and Meffre’s work reflects the contemporary culture of aestheticization in Western art and décor. As artists they are perhaps influenced by current trends in popular culture.

The physicality of these spaces made palpable by the materiality in Marchand and Meffre’s photographs also likens the structures to bodies. Whereas the Packard Motors plant, the Wurlitzer and Metropolitan buildings, Cass Technical High School, Cathedral Manor Apartments, Highland Park police station, and Broderick Tower previously existed as homes to thriving institutions and communities, once these groups left, the buildings began to fall into disrepair. The dilapidation of many of the edifices demonstrates their ephemerality and the effort on the part of the natural elements to return to equilibrium these places where the earth had been altered by human societies. Marchand and Meffre’s photographs witness the losses of the institutions and individuals now gone and simultaneously honor the cycles of environmental and human nature.

Marchand and Meffre photographed Detroit with an interest in the notion of ephemerality as it relates to physical matter as well as to human social structures. By repeatedly representing the icons of the window and clock as well as emphasizing human artifacts and the materiality of the spaces, the two effectively built a photographic portrait of Detroit that is poetic for its expressive demonstration of the city as a victim of loss. Eschewing the political for the personal, Marchand and Meffre created a poignant testament to Detroit that is both documentary and nostalgic.
Fig. 1 *Michigan Central Station*, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, cover, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 2 *Packard Motors Plant*, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 17, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 3 Wurlitzer Building, ca. 2005-2009, The Ruins of Detroit, 62, Ultrachrome print, 190 x 150 cm
Fig. 4 9th Floor, Metropolitan Building, ca. 2005-2009, The Ruins of Detroit, 67, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 5 Physics Classroom, Cass Technical High School, ca. 2005-2009, The Ruins of Detroit, 98, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 6 Jewelry Classroom, Cass Technical High School, ca. 2005-2009, The Ruins of Detroit, 99, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 7 Biology Classroom, Cass Technical High School, ca. 2005-2009, The Ruins of Detroit, 100, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 8 Melted Clock, Cass Technical High School, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 101, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 9 Cathedral Manor Apartments, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 129, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 10 Locker Room, Highland Park Police Station, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 172, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 11 Evidence Room, Highland Park Police Station, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 180, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 12 Alexander Gardner, *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg*, 1863, albumen silver print, 176 x 230 mm, collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum

Fig. 13 Benjamin Atkins’ *Evidence, Highland Park Police Station*, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 183, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 14 20th Floor Dentist Cabinet, Broderick Tower, ca. 2005-2009, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 56, Ultrachrome print, 190 x 150 cm
CHAPTER TWO

*Gunkanjima (2013):*

*Emblems of Modernity and Domestic Life on an Abandoned Japanese Coal Mining Island*

“Nature has begun to reclaim the island, but as long as the buildings stand, the ghosts of Hashima will remain, their whispers echoing amidst a sea of seemingly post-apocalyptic rubble.”

Marchand and Meffre’s second book, *Gunkanjima* (Steidl, 2013), depicts the ruins of the now-abandoned Japanese coal mining island Hashima which lies approximately fifteen kilometers off the coast of Nagasaki. Once a vibrant community of working people and their families, Hashima was abandoned in 1974 when its mine closed and has been uninhabited since that time. All that remains of the extinct mining society are the many towering apartment structures and belongings left behind by vacating workers and residents. In their writing, Marchand and Meffre profess an interest in the relationship between the architecture and the culture of labor that once prevailed on the tiny, densely-populated island, but their photographs reveal much more personal attention to the private residences and the artifacts of daily life that remain there. These images are striking in their simplicity but also poetic, signifying but not describing the people to whom the dwellings and items once belonged.

The Mitsubishi Company purchased Hashima in 1890 and developed the island for coal-mining purposes. The structures erected for industrial and residential uses and contained within a high concrete wall, all constructed around a steep rock, give the island the appearance of a battleship on the surrounding water. Hashima was thus nicknamed “Gunkanjima,” meaning

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“Battleship Island.” The nickname quickly replaced the official name Hashima in vernacular language.37

By 1916, both the coal production and population of Gunkanjima soared, and Mitsubishi built Japan’s first large-scale concrete building, an apartment block intended to improve housing conditions and prevent typhoon damage. Soon a second complex was constructed, an E-shaped structure of nine stories on the ocean side and three stories on the rock side, then the tallest building in Japan. Over the following decades, as Gunkanjima’s production and population increased, the Japanese erected more apartment buildings in an effort to meet wartime demand for coal, so that by the end of World War II more than thirty concrete apartment buildings studded the landscape.38 These complexes form a pervasive and important subject in Marchand and Meffre’s portfolio of Gunkanjima photographs.

Coal production on Gunkanjima continued for the purpose of Japanese recovery from wartime defeat and humiliation. Following the Korean War, which boosted Japanese industries between 1950 and 1953, repatriated soldiers and others moved their families to Gunkanjima for the work it offered in the coal mines. By 1959, Gunkanjima reached a peak population of 5,259 people for its total 15.6 acres, which is said to be the highest population density ever recorded anywhere. Throughout the following decade, the community on Gunkanjima developed, thriving on a tight-knit social network that resulted from its relative isolation from and concurrent dependence on the outside world.39 “Remarkably enough, however, former residents seem to agree unanimously that the tiny physical dimensions of the island and the cramped lifestyle, far

38 Ibid., 13.
from causing conflict, nurtured a culture of cooperation, mutual assistance and common
identity.”

The residents of Gunkanjima, physically cut off from the rest of Japan, had no stores or
natural resources on their rock island and so required goods and materials to be brought to them
from the mainland. Around 1963—when residents launched a campaign to have soil brought to
the island to plant rooftop gardens—appliances such as rice cookers, refrigerators, and
televisions began to become commonplace items in Gunkanjima apartments. This coal mining
community was beginning to incorporate elements of leisure into a previously bleak standard of
living. However, in the late 1960s, as Japan’s economy improved and petroleum started to
replace coal as the primary national energy resource, Mitsubishi began scaling down the
operations on Gunkanjima and slowly displacing its workers to other locations. In January 1974,
the Gunkanjima mine officially closed. The last residents left the island within three months.41
The homes and belongings they left behind have remained there for forty years, enduring
typhoons that have battered the high walls and wiped out foundations. Marchand and Meffre
walked these empty buildings to photograph the ruins of Gunkanjima, recording what was left
behind by its former inhabitants.

Since a previous landing ban on Hashima was lifted, its ruins have drawn visitors from all
over the world.42 As a poignant example of urban decay, and even more significantly, one of the
few on earth that hardly has been touched or affected by humans since its abandonment,
Gunkanjima has naturally attracted the curiosity of tourists and the attention of photographers,

40 Ibid., 15.
41 Ibid.
42 The precise dates of the ban are unclear; according to Reiji Yoshida, the ban was lifted in April 2009. “‘Warship
Island’ Open to Tourists Once More,” McClatchy Tribune Business News (April 23, 2009): n.p. However,
Marchand and Meffre state that their first trip to Hashima was in 2008. The details surrounding their access to the
island are not known. I engaged in brief email correspondence with Yves Marchand between November 3 and
December 4, 2013, but it was clear that continued communication would not be available.
sociologists, filmmakers, and others. The abandoned city even inspired the eerie lair of the villain in the most recent James Bond film, *Skyfall* (2012). The island is accessible today through various Japanese tour companies, although getting there is difficult because of rough and unpredictable seas. The terrain is so dangerous that observers are only permitted to view the ruins from behind fences. It can be assumed, then, that photographers such as Marchand and Meffre obtained special permission to traverse the ruins with more access than average visitors.

Other artists drawn to the ruins of Gunkanjima include members of StilL, a photography collective whose cofounders Guillaume Corpart Muller (who goes by his first surname only) (b. 1977) and Jan Smith (b. 1974) organized an exhibition, *Fantasmas de Gunkanjima* (*Ghosts of Gunkanjima*), in Mexico City at the Japanese Embassy in 2009. Journalist Maria Gallucci described Corpart’s and Smith’s photographs in her article, “Photos Find Life in Abandonment” (2009). Of Corpart’s work, she wrote, “A black-and-white photograph titled ‘No. 44’ shows a polished pair of a girl’s white ballet shoes, the toes pointing to a coal-covered balcony and resting on a cracked tile floor. His image ‘No. 27’ pictures an enormous heap of glass bottles piled up to the ceiling and spilling down to the floor, surrounding a metal-frame cot in what looks like a medical clinic.” Although I was unable to locate reproductions of these particular pieces, Corpart’s *No. 27* presumably depicts a room which Marchand and Meffre also photographed while visiting Gunkanjima. Gallucci’s description fits that of Marchand and Meffre’s *Room With Infusion Bottles, Hospital* (2008) (Fig. 1). Corpart explained, “‘I tried to capture how people lived, and I really tried to bring back the human elements that tie us back to a time of prosperity.’”

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45 Ibid.
the artist voices humanistic sensitivities regarding his photographs of Hashima. Based on the few of Corpart’s images from *Fantasmas de Gunkanjima* that I have managed to locate (none are titled, only labeled with the photographers’ names), I have found that the visual qualities liken them more to “traditional” fine art photographic styles than to documentary ones. Printed in black and white, the high contrast and shallow depth of field give Corpart’s images a sense of timelessness as well as one of haunting melancholia.

Smith’s images of Gunkanjima, based on the description by Gallucci, also evade documentary practices, although in a very different and much more explicit way. According to Gallucci, Smith’s work “is less about the life that remains and more about the ghosts of what once was. In a photograph titled ‘Patience,’ the blurred silhouette of a nude woman accents the crumbling window frame on which she poses. The image ‘Au Revoir Hashima’ shows rust-stained concrete walls, cracked glass, and scattered debris with the sweeping shadows of the model in movement.”

By creating composite photographs in which he incorporated ghostly figures, Smith decidedly eschewed documentary recording of the place and instead imparted a creative agenda involving symbolism and suggestion. Gallucci concludes, “The Gunkanjima exhibit coincides with the StiLL’s mission to promote art photography, Corpart said. ‘We’re bringing evermore attention to photography as conveying emotion, feelings, structures, ideas and messages.’” These artists, like Marchand and Meffre, profess more than a purely aesthetic approach and intention behind their Gunkanjima photographs. Corpart’s and Smith’s modes of execution, however, are decidedly less straightforward than are Marchand and Meffre’s.

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46 Ibid. (No reproduction available)  
In the statement that accompanies Marchand and Meffre’s images in *Gunkanjima*, the artists compare their experience of photographing the Japanese island with that of photographing Detroit. They wrote:

> When visiting ruins, we have always tried to focus on remarkable buildings that embody the psychology of an era or a system in their architecture, and to explore their metamorphoses. We have been searching for monumental and unique architecture, but there are very few places in the world offering totally abandoned urban and historical examples. Detroit allowed us to observe an aspect of modern Western world through the filter of ruins. Likewise, Gunkanjima offered the vision of a pioneer and prototypical city entirely dedicated to an industry whose principle of modernity drove it to ruin.  

This statement expounds upon the one Marchand and Meffre made regarding *The Ruins of Detroit*, referring somewhat to the “fall of empires” in which they have professed interest, but more specifically to their assertion that “Detroit has literally created, produced and manufactured our modern world, creating a logic that has eventually annihilated, destroyed the city itself.”  

We understand from their introduction to *Gunkanjima* that Marchand and Meffre take interest in ruins as a “filter” through which they can observe the values of societies now lost but whose remains were not developed or covered over by later populations. Detroit in its heyday embodied modernity and the prospects associated with the American Dream, whereas Gunkanjima was an entirely innovative concept unlike any other society in the world, whose movement toward modernity, according to Marchand and Meffre, was its downfall.

The artists continue:

> Yet these two cities were fundamentally different, both in geographical and urban terms, and this is certainly what fascinated us. Contrary to Motor City, which stretched out over a limitless geographical territory, Gunkanjima was an extremely concentrated urban complex built on an isolated island. The highways of the American metropolis contrast with the narrow lanes of the Japanese city. While the huge capital of the automobile erected neoclassical and sumptuous buildings, the miniscule mining city, [*sic*] was piling up blocks of apartments. Gunkanjima’s

49 Marchand and Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit*, 16.
architectural expression seemed to be restricted to its mere functionality. As a condensed micro-Japan on an island, Gunkanjima almost seemed to be Detroit’s oriental negative.\textsuperscript{50}

This concern is certainly evidenced in Marchand and Meffre’s images of both Detroit and Gunkanjima. \textit{The Ruins of Detroit} features sweeping photographs of vast interiors which demonstrate the attention to architecture paid by both the developers of twentieth-century Detroit and, later, by the photographers. \textit{Gunkanjima} also emphasizes architecture, but in a different manner, given the austerity of the island’s architecture. Unlike Detroit’s, Gunkanjima’s structures were designed and built to achieve functionality with little concern for grandness or ornamentation. In Marchand and Meffre’s images, the architecture is typically depicted in such a way as to achieve one of three purposes: to demonstrate its relationship to the landscape and seascape, such as in the book’s four untitled frontispieces (exemplified by Fig. 2); to illustrate nature’s interference with the abandoned structures, such as in \textit{Looking East Between Buildings 65 and 56} (ca. 2008-2012), in which weeds and trees grow up through the cement foundations, between buildings, and outward from walls (Fig. 3); or, as they did so often in \textit{The Ruins of Detroit}, to communicate the pervasiveness of the dilapidation present throughout the abandoned island, as in \textit{Gymnasium and Labor Union Meeting Place} (ca. 2008-2012), which features the cluttered space beneath an enormous collapsed ceiling (Fig. 4).

Marchand and Meffre’s statement about \textit{Gunkanjima} cites architecture as providing evidence of fallen empires’ social values, particularly as they relate to modernity. Of the island mining city, they wrote,

Long before social housing or Soviet factory cities, Gunkanjima seemed to translate a collectivist ideology, a dedication to production and the company with its depersonalized architecture and its brutal and rational style. Mine waste was directly used to expand the surface, like an anthill, digging and growing over itself before being abandoned. Gunkanjima thus seems to be the ultimate expression of

\textsuperscript{50} Marchand and Meffre, \textit{Gunkanjima}, 9.
the relationship between architecture, culture of labour and the principle of industrial modernity, which not only aims at innovation and growth, but also at the effacement of any obsolete form.\textsuperscript{51}

Based on the text alone, this concluding thought would seem to be the ideological crux of Marchand and Meffre’s interest in Gunkanjima’s ruins: that their attention to this place is centered primarily on the architecture as a lens through which one can study the “culture of labour and the principle of industrial modernity.” I contend, however, that the evidence provided by Marchand and Meffre’s photographs of their interest in Gunkanjima attests in fact to personal attention to the everyday items left behind by its inhabitants.

\textit{Gunkanjima} comprises seventy-two color photographs by Marchand and Meffre taken during two trips to the island in 2008 and 2012. Also included in the publication are twenty-two black and white historical photographs by photographer Chiyuki Ito (1918-1992) taken during Gunkanjima’s mining heyday.\textsuperscript{52} Ito’s images within the book are generally paired on facing pages to contemporary ones by Marchand and Meffre that depict the same or similar spaces or subject matter. For example, a historical, untitled photograph by Ito portraying an outdoor staircase winding downward between buildings to a crowded street (Fig. 5) faces Marchand and Meffre’s \textit{Jigokudan “Stairway to Hell”} (2008) of what appears to be the same staircase and lane, now piled with debris between towers of broken balcony banisters and fractured apartment windows (Fig. 6). Similarly, facing Marchand and Meffre’s \textit{Apartment, Building 19} (2008) which features an old and broken television set and telephone (Fig. 7) is Ito’s untitled image of a family sitting around a table in an apartment furnished with emblems of modern leisure, including a prominently placed television set nearly identical to that in Marchand and Meffre’s apartment photograph (Fig. 8). Ito’s photographs are visually distinguished from Marchand and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] Ibid.
\item[52] The exact dates of Ito’s photographs are unknown to the author.
\end{footnotes}
Meffre’s not only by their traditional, achromatic scheme versus the later color images but also are reproduced within the book at a smaller scale. This allows for immediate recognition of Ito’s populated and active photographs as distinct from and in juxtaposition to the contemporary ones of abandon and decay.

I chose the images discussed in this chapter, as in Chapter 1, for their representative characteristics of the collection as a whole as well as their being demonstrative of the particular elements of the portfolio that I will discuss: in this case, emblems of modernity (the television, telephone, and casino game machine) and domestic comfort (kitchen items, toys, and calendars). On the whole, Marchand and Meffre demonstrate an interest in the architecture of Gunkanjima as it relates to the landscape and culture of the tiny island community, in congruence with their published statement. Of the seventy-two images published, forty-three can be read as dealing primarily or exclusively with the architecture of the abandoned island, and are exemplified by Figures 2-4 and 6. Twenty-nine photographs, almost half, however, emphasize the architectural space less or not at all and instead direct our attention toward the physical items and belongings left behind on Gunkanjima forty years ago. The result is a profound feeling of loss and general pathos of the whole book. Despite the fact that their number is greater than that of the images of personal items, the collection of photographs detailing the structure and landscape of Gunkanjima lacks variation and becomes somewhat repetitive throughout the book, so that the belongings photographed in Gunkanjima apartments establish a more pervasive feeling of individual humanity and melancholia within the overall collection. The architectural photographs, therefore, act as something of a backdrop for the more personal stories of loss. Although Marchand and Meffre write about their interest in the relationship between architecture and the culture of labor, their photographs demonstrate an engagement with personal objects that
also conveys attention to the social and family cultures present during the island’s peak population in the late 1950s and 1960s. The artists establish this sympathy toward the former residents by employing motifs indicative of the optimism and prosperity associated with modernity as well as of family values and the passage of time.

One such image of abandoned objects is *Dentist Office, Building 65* (ca. 2008-2012). Although not an apartment setting, this office nonetheless depicts objects of a personal nature, such as the teacup and small teapot left upon the desk, as though the drinker has only momentarily stepped out (Fig. 9). Two miniature decorative crane statuettes also perch atop the desk, although their former owner has not inhabited the office for four decades. Most significant, though, is the small television set perched atop a broken set of shallow drawers. Together with *Apartment, Building 19*, this photograph establishes the television as an icon of the modernity so valued by Gunkanjima’s residents. *Dentist Office, Building 65* attests to the specific presence of the office’s former inhabitants by way of the tea set and crane statuettes, as well as to the overall history of prosperity and subsequent fall of the tiny coal mining city.

The television set and other appliances represent the mid-twentieth-century prosperity that Gunkanjima’s inhabitants briefly enjoyed as well as the sense of optimism granted them by these modern luxuries. According to Brian Burke-Gaffney, professor of Environment and Architecture at the Nagasaki Institute of Applied Science and specialist in cross-cultural studies and social history (and who composed the introduction to *Gunkanjima*), prior to 1960 the island had only two telephones for private use. “Residents making calls out of the island used the telephone in the post office, but people calling in invariably dialed the number in the retail shop and waited while the recipient of the call was summoned to the shop by a relay of cries from
apartment to apartment.” It is unclear at what time telephones made their way into residences on Gunkanjima, but presumably they did so when the prevalence of appliances and other luxuries increased on the island in the early 1960s, as telephones can be observed in Marchand and Meffre’s photographs such as Apartment, Building 19 and Pachinko Machine, Building 65 (ca. 2008-2012).

In Pachinko Machine, Building 65, Marchand and Meffre show us three emblems of modernity and prosperity present in 1960s Gunkanjima: the telephone, the casino pachinko machine, and part of a television set (Fig. 10). The casino machine is featured most prominently at the center of the composition, depicted frontally, but evidently missing all or a portion of its display. Around the brightly-colored game device are scattered various articles of debris. Discernible on the right is the plastic casing from the front of an old-fashioned television set, like those depicted in Figures 7 through 9. On the left, a telephone receiver lies askew from its stand amid several discarded pieces of wood. Facing this photograph is one by Ito of two rows of casino game machines retreating backward into space, repeating infinitely, each being played by a young male resident of Gunkanjima, presumably mining employees of Mitsubishi (Fig. 11). This pairing establishes the success of the Gunkanjima mine and the generosity with which Mitsubishi presumably provided for its workers—or possibly a way in which the corporation took advantage of Gunkanjima’s “captive” population—as well as a visual tripling of icons of the island’s relative affluence and, retrospectively, its subsequent collapse. As such, these items also demonstrate the lifestyle that Gunkanjima workers and their families enjoyed during its peak production era. The image of the machines broken and decayed demonstrates the loss of the

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53 Burke-Gaffney, 15.
prospering society and its individual members, or perhaps the notion that greed may have led to the society’s destruction.

In an uncanny likeness to their Detroit photograph of the Broderick Tower dentist’s examination room, Marchand and Meffre made the Gunkanjima equivalent, Dentist Cabinet, Building 65 (ca. 2008-2012), in which partial dentures, plaster casts of patients’ jaws, and even a tray of apparent human teeth lay strewn atop a corner desk (Fig. 12). Here, as in Detroit, Marchand and Meffre capture images of direct imprints from and, in this case, literal pieces of the office’s former patients, linking the viewer to Gunkanjima’s residents’ physical selves. Thus a relationship with the former inhabitants and a sense of loss regarding their absence is forged.

In Pachinko Machine, Building 65 Marchand and Meffre use the icons of modern luxury—the telephone, the casino game, and the television set—as a means of memorializing the relatively comfortable lifestyle that the community on Gunkanjima had achieved by the 1960s. By juxtaposing this image with a historical one demonstrating the residents’ economic stability and optimism, the contemporary photographers establish a poignant reference to the failure of a thriving society. Throughout Gunkanjima Marchand and Meffre use images of objects—items that represent former human presence—to establish a feeling of melancholia amongst their documentary photographs of the abandoned island and its architecture.

At Gunkanjima’s inception as a coal mining island in the 1890s, its workers and inhabitants were mostly convicts sentenced to terms of hard labor. It was not until after the Korean War when Japan’s industries flourished that the community on Gunkanjima thrived. At that time prosperous Mitsubishi employees and their young families comprised the island’s population.54 This new society, invigorated by the promising opportunities offered by the

54 Ibid., 11-13.
modernity now available through Japan’s strengthening economic climate, is the one that existed at the time of the transition to oil and was abruptly cut short. It is evidence of this society, therefore, that is preserved in the ruins of Gunkanjima. Marchand and Meffre document the values of family and community that were established by the isolated population on Gunkanjima in the 1950s and 1960s by drawing the viewer’s attention to pieces of domestic life.

Many of the belongings photographed by Marchand and Meffre were left behind in residential apartments and give us a view into the private daily lives of Gunkanjima’s residents. One such composition is *Kitchen, Building 65* (ca. 2008-2012), in which a kitchen sink and two shelves are pictured, laden with scattered dishes, cleaning product containers, and other household implements (Fig. 13). A tea kettle and two bottles lie in the sink amid pieces of wood and pegboard which appear to have fallen there haphazardly over time. Grimy bottles stand on shelves, one apparently still containing soy sauce. Bowls of varying shapes and sizes are stacked indiscriminately, having accumulated decades of dust. On the top shelf at left, a purple drinking glass perches on a now-rusted rack which looks as though it will soon crumble beneath the fragile vessel. These items remain as they were, abandoned but nonetheless steadfast delegates of the family life they once facilitated. As the kitchen represents the epicenter of the home and acts as an extension of the vitality within it, these remaining objects pose as indicators of the family unit that resided in this apartment and the importance of domestic comfort on Gunkanjima.

Even more touching, however, are two photographs which eschew the architectural setting entirely and instead simply feature individual items. In *Tricycle, Building 65* (ca. 2008-2012) and *Toy Train, Building 65* (ca. 2008-2012), rather than seating the toys in specific and identifiable spaces, Marchand and Meffre eliminate depth altogether by photographing them
from above and using the floor plane as a backdrop. The emphasis here is on the materiality of the objects. In *Tricycle, Building 65*, the emblem of childhood is shown rusted and in pieces, the seat detached and its cartoon image of the fawn Bambi faded and discolored (Fig. 14). Over time the structure of the vehicle has disintegrated, its parts now collapsed around it. The result conjures the bizarre scene of a long-ago, horrific tricycle accident. *Toy Train, Building 65* is hardly more optimistic, depicting a rusted and filthy blue train car amid fallen plaster and other detritus (Fig. 15). Rust seems to have crept forward from the rear of the train, obscuring the details of the back half of the toy. Despite their apparent derailment, some of the train’s painted-on passengers are still visible in its windows, luridly colored and placidly gazing at one another.

Four decades have passed since a child played with this train; its former owner is now presumably an adult but his or her fate cannot be known, nor can that of the tricycle’s one-time rider. Such an enigma calls to mind Roland Barthes’ (1950-1980) discussion in *Camera Lucida* (1982) of the essence of the person in an object and thus within its photographic representation. Paradoxically, though, Barthes acknowledges the photograph’s direct reference to and yet fundamental inaccessibility of a photograph’s referent to the viewer.\(^{55}\) *Tricycle, Building 65* and *Toy Train, Building 65* both signify the children to whom they once belonged and yet can do no more than represent the objects themselves, poetically suspended in time.

In the photographs of apartment interiors, particularly those which emphasize kitchens and children’s toys, Marchand and Meffre have abandoned their investigation of the architecture’s significance to Gunkanjima’s culture and instead focused their lens on people’s lives and the fact that these lives no longer exist as they did. These poignant emphases on the daily habits and practices of the island’s residents indicate a quiet reflection on the part of the

artists regarding the values of the society itself and establish melancholia for the loss of the civilization. The photographs that comprise Gunkanjima are not merely documents of spaces but testimonials to people.

In Gunkanjima, as in The Ruins of Detroit, Marchand and Meffre make use of a pointed and iconic reference to time: the wall calendar. Apartment, Apartment Complex 16-20 (ca. 2008-2012) documents a page prominently featuring a photograph of the head and shoulders of an attractive young woman in a modest, pale blue, feminine suit jacket and holding hydrangeas (Fig. 16). The upper right corner of the page has parted from the wall and fallen, obscuring one quarter of the woman’s face. She is at once presented for the viewer’s gaze and yet not completely available to it. Along the left and bottom edges of the portrait are printed the months and dates of the year 1969. In this image, like the photographs of the toys, Marchand and Meffre have neglected architecture and space for a shallow composition and instead emphasized materiality and object. The image is bisected, the calendar and the panel on which it is mounted inhabiting the right half of the frame and the left half receding into the shallow depth of perhaps a cupboard or closet. Inside the cupboard are in the foreground a box adorned with images of the kitchen appliance it contained, a second, narrower box standing on end and printed with a graphic pattern, and a plain brown cardboard box, around and on top of which are strewn sheets of yellowed, crumbling newsprint.

The emphasis of the calendar page brings to mind the interest Marchand and Meffre profess to the passage of time and change of eras. That this page has been affixed to the wall for presumably more than four decades provides an astounding reminder of the duration in which the island has been uninhabited and left to decay. The photographers’ provocative presentation of the calendar page itself illustrates their specific interest in time. In this photograph, the fraction
of a second recorded by the camera becomes indistinguishable from any one of the moments of the past forty years. The moment frozen represents eternity in the uncanny double-effect of the historical freeze frame compounded by the arresting devices of the photographic medium. In this way, linear-constructed time is complicated by the interminable halted instant. On Gunkanjima, the very stillness of such a historical vacuum may be considered, poetically, a photograph forty years in waiting.

As in *The Ruins of Detroit*, the photographs in *Gunkanjima* demonstrate not only the society that existed there in the past, but also the long interval between then and now. In addition to the remnants and artifacts of the community that once flourished, Marchand and Meffre’s images reveal the simultaneous erosion and growth that has taken place since the empire’s fall. The calendar page reminds us of the length of time that has passed during which the earth and sea have been allowed to ravage the tiny island, uninhibited by any people.

The materiality of the subjects of Marchand and Meffre’s *Gunkanjima* images is, as in *The Ruins of Detroit*, essential to our understanding of the duration of time passed as well as the sense of isolation and feeling of melancholia demonstrated in the photographs. However, *Gunkanjima*’s materiality—the physicality of the decay—differs from the Detroit images in a fundamental way: the spaces recorded on the coal mining island truly have been abandoned in every sense of the word. Unlike in Detroit, where squatters and vandals have interfered with the derelict buildings, the structures in Gunkanjima have remained completely uninhabited since 1974. No graffiti embellishes the walls; books and furniture have not been burned for warmth or recreation; metallic elements of the structures endure and were not stripped for resale. Rather, Gunkanjima has remained virtually untouched by outsiders, left to the devices of the
environment which has very slowly begun to return the island to its natural equilibrium as trees grow through the slag foundations and structures fall to the pressure of wind and waves.

The absence of graffiti and other evidence of vandalism helps to reinforce the decided lack of political inferences present in Marchand and Meffre’s *Gunkanjima* photographs. Whereas many of the Detroit buildings did feature these potentially problematic motifs—which Marchand and Meffre carefully presented in a passive and unobtrusive manner so as to remain dispassionate on the matter of sociopolitical concerns—Gunkanjima lacks these themes altogether. As a result, the collection imparts a more poetic interpretation of the island’s isolation and is made emotional by the inclusion of so many personal objects. In addition to Marchand and Meffre’s professed interest in the architecture as being indicative of the culture on the once-flourishing island, their focus on emblems of modernity, domesticity, and the passage of time reveals an underlying attention to the people who shaped and were shaped by the society itself.

The appeal of Gunkanjima’s ruins extends to visitors not just for their aesthetic, touristic, and sociological intrigue, but also for their potential as locations for truly emotional—not merely aesthetic or “pornographic”—images. Marchand and Meffre, Corpart, and Smith all act as sociologists, philosophers, adventurers, historians, and photographers in their endeavors to find meaning in ruins. Marchand and Meffre, whose photographic style in and of itself does not reveal anything other than a documentary approach to image making, establish melancholia and nostalgia in their images through their use of symbols, icons, and objects as a means of exploring philosophical matters of time and existence. By emphasizing emblems of modernity such as the television and personal belongings, the artists instill a distinct feeling of loss in their photographs.
of the tiny, desolate island. On Gunkanjima, as in Detroit, Marchand and Meffre evoke a sense of melancholia for a lost society and the abandonment of its former home.
Fig. 1 *Room with Infusion Bottles, Hospital*, 2008, *Gunkanjima*, 38, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 2 Untitled, ca. 2008-2012, *Gunkanjima*, 5, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 3 *Looking East Between Buildings 65 and 56*, ca. 2008-2012, *Gunkanjima*, 33, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 4 *Gymnasium and Labor Union Meeting Place*, ca. 2008-2012, *Gunkanjima*, 75, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 5 Chiyuki Ito, Untitled, date unk., *Gunkanjima*, 16, med. unk., dim. unk.

Fig. 6 Jigokudan “Stairway to Hell,” 2008, *Gunkanjima*, 17, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 7 *Apartment, Building 19, 2008, Gunkanjima, 25*, chromogenic print, 95 x 120 cm

Fig. 8 Chiyuki Ito, *Untitled*, date unk., *Gunkanjima, 24*, med. unk., dim. unk.
Fig. 9 Dentist Office, Building 65, ca. 2008-2012, Gunkanjima, 79. Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 10 Pachinko Machine, Building 65, ca. 2008-2012, Gunkanjima, 55, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 11 Chiyuki Ito, Untitled, date unk., Gunkanjima, 54, med. unk., dim. unk.
Fig. 12 *Dentist Cabinet, Building 65*, ca. 2008-2012, *Gunkanjima*, 81, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 13 *Kitchen, Building 65*, ca. 2008-2012, *Gunkanjima*, 21, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 14 *Tricycle, Building 65*, ca. 2008-2012, *Gunkanjima*, 43, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 15 *Toy Train, Building 65*, ca. 2008-2012, *Gunkanjima*, 56, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 16 Apartment, Apartment Complex 16-20, ca. 2008-2012, Gunkanjima, 63, Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
CHAPTER THREE

“Theaters” (2005-Present):
Theatricality, Spectacle, and Transformation in Twentieth-Century Theaters

The third major body of work by Marchand and Meffre, “Theaters,” is an ongoing project, begun in 2005. “Theaters” is not published in book form but it exhibits internationally and is available on the artists’ website.56 For this collection, Marchand and Meffre photographed several early twentieth-century American theaters in their current conditions. Because this portfolio is not completed and there are relatively few photographs available for analysis (only nineteen are reproduced on Marchand and Meffre’s site), this body of work is somewhat more difficult to interpret than The Ruins of Detroit or Gunkanjima.57 Given its emphasis by the artists on their website as a third significant portfolio, however, it should be considered in the examination of their work as a whole. Adding to the difficulty in discussing the artistic intent behind “Theaters” is the fact that in their statement accompanying the collection online, Marchand and Meffre give only a broad historical overview of theaters in twentieth-century America and no information regarding their own interest in the structures or motivations for recording them. My investigation, therefore, will depend primarily on formal analyses of the images as well as the scholarship regarding Marchand and Meffre’s larger body of ruins photographs.

For the interpretation of “Theaters,” I will analyze all nineteen individual images as well as groupings of visually related photographs in order to identify themes present throughout the

57 Prior to the publication of this thesis, I found that ten additional photographs from “Theaters” are reproduced on the Polka Galerie website (http://www.polkagalerie.com/en/yves-marchand-romain-meffre-travaux.htm), but because of the lateness of this discovery I will not discuss these.
collection. In this way, the reader will be able to gain a more thorough understanding of “Theaters” than of *The Ruins of Detroit* or *Gunkanjima* on the whole. Additionally, the discussion of each of the available images individually will allow for a more complete reading of the body of work, and therefore a potentially more conclusive deduction regarding its interpretation.

Because “Theaters” is comprised of only nineteen images—a small number when compared to the 186 in *The Ruins of Detroit* or even *Gunkanjima*’s seventy-two, this portfolio may represent a microcosm of Marchand and Meffre’s method of exploring a given location or theme of urban decay. Marchand and Meffre tend to develop volumes largely of compositions depicting expansive, open regions with a smaller percentage of closer images encompassing narrower areas portraying objects rather than spaces. The result is a greater emphasis on these latter images because of the extent to which they depart from Marchand and Meffre’s standard convention. The primary focus on large spaces and dramatic depictions of decay lends a more significant poignancy to the vignettes of previously functional objects and to the understanding that they were once used by individuals who are no longer present. Although such depictions are relatively fewer in number in “Theaters” than in the previous collections, the nostalgic effect of narrowing the composition to a smaller focus is not lost. Because these theater spaces are of a public nature, in contrast to the more private and residential spaces depicted in *The Ruins of Detroit* and *Gunkanjima*, the nostalgia and melancholia that Marchand and Meffre’s images evoke in this portfolio are less in reference to the loss of people or societies and pertain more to the loss of modernity, of optimism, and of the theater and cinema culture of the early twentieth century. In “Theaters,” the locations Marchand and Meffre examine in many cases demonstrate transformation rather than ruination. The sorts of conversions they witness tend to exemplify
ironic plays on the concepts of theatricality and spectacle in these former performance venues, and often impart notions of absurdity.

To introduce the topic of theaters as urban ruins, in their website portfolio Marchand and Meffre include a brief explanation of the construction and subsequent abandonment of grand performance venues in American cities. They wrote:

In the early 20th century, following the development of the entertainment industry, hundreds of theaters were built across North America. Major entertainment firms and movie studios commissioned specialized architects to build grandiose and extravagant auditoriums.

From the 60's, TV, multiplexes and urban crisis made them obsolete. During the following decades, these theaters were either modernized, transformed into adult cinemas or they closed, one after the other; many of them were simply demolished.

Those which remain, escaping this fate, have been converted to serve varied purposes.

Now, many are reused as churches, retail space, flea markets, bingo halls, discos, supermarkets or warehouses. Some others just sit abandoned.58

As we previously saw in their statements accompanying The Ruins of Detroit and Gunkanjima, nowhere in the above passage do Marchand and Meffre declare any sort of political opinion regarding the use and disposal of the theater structures. They make no critique of capitalism, consumerism, or the American entertainment industry when introducing their work on theaters. However, unlike in their published works, the artists fail to provide any information regarding their reason for looking at these structures. It can be inferred, of course, that as remnants of once-grand architectural celebrations of American prosperity, the theaters simply provide another genre of existing urban ruins that fit the type by which Marchand and Meffre have been intrigued for several years. Unusually, though, and perhaps solely because the work has not been

published in print, the photographers provide no insight into their motivations for looking at theaters specifically.

The photographs that compose the “Theaters” portfolio online can be grouped into three categories. The first includes images of theaters’ exteriors amidst contemporary items of urban culture such as street lamps, parking meters, and retail signs. The second and largest group depicts the interior spaces of the theaters, capturing both the performance and viewing areas. The third category consists of photographs focusing on smaller spaces and objects iconic to theater culture. These are the images whose quietness and poignancy are accentuated by the overall grandeur conveyed by the architectural spaces throughout the rest of the portfolio. These relatively few photographs instill “Theaters” with a quality of nostalgia that is made all the more poignant by the pervasiveness of more dramatic, sweeping scenes.

Only three photographs presented in “Theaters” depict contemporary exterior and contextual views of the structures. Proctor’s Theater, Newark (ca. 2005-2013), Westlake Theater, Los Angeles (ca. 2005-2013), and Loew’s Kings Theater, New York (ca. 2005-2013) demonstrate the contexts in which the three theaters are situated in twenty-first-century societies. In my interpretation, these images serve primarily to illustrate the repurposing of theater buildings that Marchand and Meffre mention in their statement.

Proctor’s Theater, Newark does not give any direct architectural evidence that the structure is a theater (Fig. 1). The building is an unusual one, the façade a row of low storefronts punctuated by a high, narrow tower with other taller components of the building or surrounding structures visible behind the short front wall. A row of signs announces the retail tenants: “Audio Vibrations Beepers” (an industry which already would have been essentially obsolete by the time Marchand and Meffre began this portfolio in 2005); “Top 2000 Sneaker Joint” and its
presumed competitor next door, “108 Sneakers;” and “J5,” a clothing store densely packed with merchandise. These all appear to be low-end vendors selling relatively inexpensive products. Aside from one easily overlooked person standing in a shop vestibule at the left of the composition, the street is devoid of people, and even of detritus. No cars are parked or passing on the four-lane street in front of the shops. The sun is low, indicating that it is either early morning or twilight, and calling to mind the concepts of cyclical and linear time. The shop lights create a warm band of light along the bottom of the image. The street lamps are dark while light from the likely setting sun is barely visible over the rooftops on the right. Sky composes the upper half of the image, throwing into relief the unusual, ornamented tower and other architectural embellishments and recalling American modernism and industry. The emphasis of sky and the retreating sunlight symbolize the declining point in which this theater resides in its cycle. This is not so much the ruin of a theater as it is a different entity altogether. This first image introduces the idea of transformation in the portfolio.

Another converted theater is exemplified in Westlake Theater, Los Angeles, although this image conveys a markedly different affect than the first (Fig. 2). As opposed to the solemn and static Proctor’s Theater at dusk, Westlake Theater is populated and lively. Although it evidently no longer serves an active role as a theater (signs on the façade announce a swap meet and various seemingly low-cost retailers), a large, old-fashioned sign above the roof identifies “Westlake Theatre” and an intact marquee advertises the Westlake Swap Meet. The sidewalk is crowded with passersby and two cars line the curb on either side of the theater entrance. Strong shadows indicate that the sun is nearly overhead in the deep blue, cloudless sky. As in Proctor’s Theater, Newark, there is an element of absurdity in Westlake Theater, Los Angeles because of the paradox inherent in the repurposing of presumably one-opulent theaters, icons of American
prosperity, into shops for vendors geared toward low-income consumers. In these two images, the transformations that the theaters have undergone have changed not only the purpose but also the meanings and identities of the buildings.

The third exterior photograph features an abandoned theater rather than a repurposed one. *Loew’s Theater, New York* stands, apparently empty, on a block between a video game store and an empty, weed-ridden lot (Fig. 3). The radio motif of the façade juts upward into the blue and cloudy sky, still bearing its grand carved ornamentation, but below it the marquee is empty and apparently crumbling. Rather than having been transformed, Loew’s Theater, like so many of Marchand and Meffre’s other subjects, was left to degrade. Here, cars sit at meters in front of the building and a pedestrian is shown walking past the front doors. Formerly a grand work of architecture, this structure’s one-time inhabitants abandoned it and today passersby continue to neglect it. This theater decays, transforming in a way, although unlike Proctor’s and Westlake Theaters, Loew’s Theater, stripped and dirty, underwent not a repurposing but rather a change of state from prosperity to degradation.

The inclusion of three exteriors in the portfolio shows the types of environments that currently exist surrounding the theaters and the roles in which the buildings function in contemporary cultures. In each case, features of the architecture indicate the structures’ former identities and differentiate them from the buildings and storefronts around them. These photographs demonstrate the last sentence of Marchand and Meffre’s introduction: “Now, many are reused as churches, retail space, flea markets, bingo halls, discos, supermarkets or warehouses. Some others just sit abandoned.” They do not particularly underscore the drama or forlornness to which Marchand and Meffre are so frequently sensitive in their work, but rather provide documentary evidence of the architecture’s current use. What they do convey is the
poetic attention to time and cycles and the loss of the theaters’ former role in society. Marchand and Meffre write,

Indeed, theaters are the reflection of art, culture and creation. It’s an irony to see these places of fantasy and dream invaded by the most typical beliefs of our modern society. In a very general way, we think this is something primary related to the end of innocence.

The architecture of these theaters [was] a mosaic of different cultures and ideas. We try to accept the uninvited elements as part of the decor. It became [a] hybrid creature, a bond between our past consciences and actual condition.\(^{59}\)

Whereas the structures once symbolized the prosperity of modern America, all vestiges of their former optimism are gone and we are left with the updated, renovated, and neglected shells of theaters, their identities all but obscured by the camouflage of parking meters, cars, and retail advertisements. Nostalgia is evoked, however, in the characteristic architecture indicative of early-twentieth-century optimism.

Thirteen photographs depict the theaters’ interiors with an emphasis on the architecture of the buildings, capturing either the proscenium arch and surrounding walls, the rows of seats which typically span several stories, or portions of both. These types of images are most prevalent throughout the portfolio and can be divided into subcategories: repurposed spaces; conventional or formulaic recordings of the theater space, made from the mezzanine level (the upper level of seating), perpendicular to the proscenium; dynamic images that break the previous formula and focus on the materiality of the decay in the space; one image that shares characteristics of both of the two previous categories; and one that represents an outlier from Marchand and Meffre’s entire body of work with its obvious inclusion of people.\(^{60}\)

\(^{59}\) From an unpublished interview, provided by Marchand to me via email on November 3, 2013.

\(^{60}\) Figures 1-4 also include people, although in these images figures are viewed from a distance and are a comparatively small and easily overlooked in the composition.
In some cases, these architectural compositions record the unlikely uses that these majestic structures now serve: a gymnasium with basketball court, as in *Paramount Theater, Brooklyn, New York* (2008); an apparent mattress and furniture warehouse or storage facility, as in *Eagle Theater, New York* (2009); and a shoe store, as in *RKO Dyker Theater, New York* (ca. 2005-2013). In such examples as these, grand neoclassical architecture is demonstrative of early twentieth-century optimism and celebration of the entertainment industry. The contemporary uses to which the structures are put, however, adds an element of absurdity and calls to mind the notion of spectacle with which theaters and cinemas, as social spaces for the purpose of visual experiences, are so inextricable linked.

*Paramount Theater, Brooklyn, New York*, for instance, shows that this converted theater now serves as an athletic arena with a large basketball court at floor level and a scoreboard under the arch, behind which a smaller court is situated (Fig. 4). Ironically (because the audience area would have been dark during performances), a lighting system now illuminates what was once the orchestra seating space from a grid erected above the larger court. We look out over the court like members of a nonexistent crowd as a solitary custodian buffs the gleaming surface of the court. In an instance of absurdity, we are the spectators of a non-event that is occurring in the very space where, once, hundreds (if not thousands) gathered to watch actual occurrences of spectacle. The slick floor contrasts with the heavily textured, ornamented ceiling which, in conjunction with our bird’s eye view, further enhances the notion of theatricality in this seemingly mundane photograph.

Absurdity is a recurring theme in this second group of images. *Eagle Theater, New York* now serves as a storage space for furniture, featuring fluorescent lighting fixtures suspended on chains from the decorative ceiling (Fig. 5). The top of the proscenium arch and the red velvet
valence across it are just visible behind the large mass of furniture inhabiting the space; it can be presumed but, because of an ambiguous depth of field, not necessarily concluded that these objects and the camera are positioned at the mezzanine level. Here the scene we look upon is not so much a spectacle but a transformation of the space made absurd by the sheer accumulation of furniture and the exaggeration of its volume by the camera placement.

In *RKO Dyker Theater, New York*, the location of the pictured space within the theater is unknown (Fig. 6). The image depicts a central arch, which may be the proscenium over the stage (in which case we understand the current floor to be an addition in the creation of a second story over the orchestra level), or perhaps the room was formerly a lobby or foyer. In any case, this particular space now serves as an athletic shoe department or store. Below an intricate white ceiling, aisles retreat from the camera between rows of displays and shoeboxes. On the opposite wall, beneath precisely symmetrical architectural details, a sign announcing “FOOTWEAR” sits just left of center of a gold shield embellishment at the middle of the arch. In RKO Dyker Theater, theatricality is demonstrated once more through the purposeful display of merchandise which, as in the repurposing of Paramount and Eagle Theaters, introduces ludicrousness. That the grand architecture of this once beautiful theater now serves as the novel ornamentation of a retail store is itself an instance of theatricality.

With *Paramount Theater, Eagle Theater, and RKO Dyker Theater*, Marchand and Meffre demonstrate the way in which the theaters’ architecture and embellishments provide a picturesque and unusual backdrop for otherwise commonplace contemporary functional spaces. The buildings’ myriad uses and the lofty, bird’s-eye vantage from which we observe them, however, lend distinct absurdity to the compositions. The associations that the theater space carries impose ideas of theatricality and spectacle on the photographs, lending to them
philosophical implications in spite of their documentary style. The arch motif and emphasis on the high ceilings and their decorations in particular establish the theatrical setting, thus allowing for such poetic readings of the images.

A less straightforward demonstration of the duality of a converted theater space is depicted in Loew’s 46th Street Theater, Brooklyn, NY (2007). In this photograph the fluorescent-lit furniture inhabiting the warehouse space to which the orchestra seating level has been repurposed is overexposed almost to obscurity (Fig. 7). Instead, Marchand and Meffre made technical considerations to favor the low-light conditions in the upper mezzanine area, emphasizing the dusty, decaying seats, crumbling architectural details, and peeling royal blue ceiling. Below, the orchestra space resembles a greenish fluorescent underworld. The light directed into this lower area comes from fixtures near the ceiling, two of which cast beams dramatically captured by the camera. Here, again, the heavy and apparent lighting of the audience space seems ironic. In Loew’s Theater, the rows and rows of chairs and cabinets are the subject of the new spectacle and we, from practically outside the seating arena, are the spectators.

Another photograph that demonstrates a jarring repurposing of a theater structure is Central Park Theater, Chicago (ca. 2005-2013), in which a drop ceiling of acoustic tiles has been inserted at mezzanine height (Fig. 8). Patches of artificial light like spotlights spread onto the false “floor” around openings from the unknowable area below. On the right, red velvet seats and a stack of wooden chairs are illuminated by a large natural light source outside the frame. The expansive ceiling’s intricately molded adornments now appear oversized for viewing from this newly delineated upper “floor.” In this image, Marchand and Meffre establish a poignancy through sensitivity to the symbolic effects of light, in contrast to the bizarre transformation of a
modern structure for contemporary uses. By photographing the spaces from above, in Loew’s 46th Street Theater and Central Park Theater the photographers demonstrate the absurdity of the conversion of a grand and elegant space for banal and unremarkable new purposes.

More frequently, though, the wide compositions show abandoned spaces rather than converted or repurposed ones. Of the thirteen photographs featuring theater interiors, eight depict scenes strictly of decay. Some, such as Loew’s Palace Theater, Bridgeport, CT (2007) and Mezzanine, Uptown Theater, Chicago, IL (2009) provide little evidence of degradation aside from surface deterioration: crumbling plaster, peeling paint, and the like. Loew’s Palace Theater is mostly empty but appears to be clean, with no evidence of detritus or vandalism amid the rows of audience seats (Fig. 9). Faded curtains, now maroon and brown with age, still hang above the stage, framing a heap of tables or boxes. The image is dispassionate, a straightforward and symmetrical depiction of the room, but it emphasizes the intricate painted patterns on the walls and ceiling that are simultaneously obscured and transformed by the mottling of decay. A noteworthy feature of this photograph is the uniform wash of light, the source of which is not immediately obvious, but which is revealed by the shadows of the seats in the foreground to originate at the camera’s position. A similarly directional, intense light is present in Mezzanine, Uptown Theater, Chicago (Fig.10). Here, the light source, possibly provided by Marchand and Meffre, is positioned outside the frame at the lower right. The shadows on the backs of the seats in the mezzanine recall the reflected light from a cinema projector screen. By giving little evidence of abandonment, Marchand and Meffre do not explicitly demonstrate that Uptown Theater, Chicago is necessarily a ruin or degraded structure, but in this image they do impart a cinematic nostalgia to the empty space.
Other images exhibit signs of more severe damage to the walls and architectural details as well as significant amounts of debris, as we can see in *Uptown Theater, Philadelphia, PA* (2009) and *Fabian Theater, Paterson* (ca. 2005-2013). In these scenes in particular the inclusion of torn and filthy drapery in conjunction with the architecture calls to mind antique sculpture and performance and seems to mourn the desertion of these spaces by the theatrical arts. In *Uptown Theater, Philadelphia* we observe signs of disuse among distinct indicators of this space’s former purpose (Fig. 11). Although this theater has been in disrepair for quite some time (gray paint peels from the intricately molded ceiling and graffitied walls, a tarp drapes over the front rail of the mezzanine, and a string of temporary workshop lights spans the length of the ceiling), the stage and its surroundings show evidence of past productions. Stage lighting instruments hang on either side of the proscenium, a blue curtain is suspended in the air halfway above stage level, and a red and blue painted arch with columns reminiscent of Greek drama stands at center stage. *Fabian Theater, Paterson*, on the other hand, shows more significant signs of vandalism and relatively fewer indications of its former role (Fig. 12). Here the light blue theater seats have mostly been removed, with only five partial rows remaining. Debris litters the risers in the chairs’ absence. Torn drapery hangs loosely from its frame in the ceiling. Plaster seems to have fallen or been torn from the far wall, revealing brick behind it. The brightly colored ceiling also shows evidence of missing paint and plaster. A projector screen, much smaller than the stage over which it hangs, indicates that this theater was once used as a cinema.

One image, *Kenosha Theater, Kenosha, WI* (2009), exhibits a surprising duality: the interior is in serious disrepair, with holes in the mezzanine railing, crumbling paint and plaster, and a ceiling missing altogether, and yet the orchestra level is brightly lit as though the space is still in use (Fig. 13). Points of light are visible near the ground level and appear to come from
bare bulbs, which, admittedly, may have been placed there by the photographers themselves (although in one interview they only mention using a flashlight to add illumination, and that this is only in instances of total darkness). In any case, the dichotomy of advanced degradation against such blatant evidence of inhabitance is striking.

Throughout the “Theaters” portfolio, Marchand and Meffre establish a loose formula for photographing the interior spaces of many of these former performance venues, an approach which is evident in *Kenosha Theater* as well as several of the previously mentioned photographs. In this image, Marchand and Meffre recorded the space from a point in the mezzanine directly facing the proscenium so that the composition is symmetrical, and from a height approximate to that of the arch. For instance, in Figures 4 through 6, the arches are detectable even where they have been covered over or obscured. In these three photographs, Marchand and Meffre’s treatment of the architecture fits the method the artists adopted for recording abandoned theaters in spite of the spaces’ alterations. This mode of composition imparts a formality and detachment on this grouping of images, causing them to stand in contrast to those which do not use the same formula. Even this deadpan approach, however, conveys a sense of theatricality, as we are positioned literally within the viewing space and yet in a position almost of omnipotence, as though we both inhabit and supersede the transformed theater spaces.

This particular style of frontal vantage point is reminiscent of the photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto (b. 1948). In his characteristic mode of rendering twentieth-century theaters, Sugimoto depicts the spaces from precisely the same angle as do Marchand and Meffre, as evidenced in his *Cabot Street Cinema, Massachusetts* (1978), although his long exposures of glowing movie screens are both visually and conceptually very different from Marchand and

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61 This information comes from an unpublished interview, provided by Marchand to me via email on November 3, 2013.
Meffre’s style (Fig. 14). In the mid to late 1970s, Sugimoto began recording the entireties of films in single exposures using a large-format view camera (as do Marchand and Meffre). “The result shows a blank screen, glowing ethereally in the center of the photographic composition. The light projected from the screen illuminates the interior of the theatre, making discernable the architectural details that would normally not be accessible to a theatre-goer seated in the darkened room.” Although Sugimoto’s cinema appears to be in perfect condition and its surfaces seem to glow in the light of the screen (as opposed to Marchand and Meffre’s), it is notable that his images are likewise always devoid of people. Also like Marchand and Meffre, Sugimoto observes that the grand movie palaces of the 1920s and 1930s no longer maintain the cultural importance that they held in their heyday. “The void on the screens is complemented by the void in the theatres.” Sugimoto’s photographs challenge the inherent ability of the photograph to capture and record an instant by extending the length of the moment to span an entire film. Thus, each individual photograph encompasses and subsequently presents thousands of cinematic frames, combining them into a single result: one blank screen. The screen resembles an artificial window, yet it does not reveal. Like Marchand and Meffre, Sugimoto makes photographs that are documentary in execution but ultimately instilled with a far more philosophical meaning. Whereas Marchand and Meffre vary in their chosen vantages when photographing theaters, Sugimoto’s uniform straightforward, formulaic frontal view for all of his cinema photographs is crucial to their meaning.

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62 It may be noted that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, Marchand and Meffre titled their images the same way that Sugimoto titled his, naming the theater and the geographic location.
64 Ibid.
Where Marchand and Meffre depart from this formula, we observe scenes of far more remarkable pictorial depth than that of Kenosha Theater and others with similar compositions. The effect of Fabian Theater, Paterson, for example, stands in contrast to the straightforward composition of Uptown Theater, Philadelphia, PA which—although it varies slightly from the formula I have described, as it is not shot from directly center of the arch—exhibits a far more deadpan presentation. Fabian Theater, Paterson instead achieves a higher level of drama by the use of an obtuse camera angle, causing the curving lines of the architecture to sweep dramatically backward in space. The wide angle lens also allows for an emphasis of the unusual ovoid shape of the recessed ceiling. Despite featuring many of the same structural and material elements—rows of seating, repetition of arches, decorative ceiling motifs, and draped fabric—Fabian Theater and Upton Theater, Philadelphia are decidedly unequal in dramatic impact. The far more dynamic image, Fabian Theater, imparts a greater sense of intimacy by redirecting the lens away from the formulaic, perpendicular camera angle. In this photograph, the viewer is drawn into the scene, whereas the environment in Uptown Theater, Philadelphia, is less accessible.

Upper Auditorium, Proctor's Theater, Newark, NJ (2006) provides a second example of the way in which Marchand and Meffre represent the drama present in the abandoned space by departing from the straightforward representation of the stage arch (Fig. 15). In this photograph, the camera is positioned at the orchestra level near the stage. The relative lowness of the vantage point in conjunction with the upward camera angle—and the fact that the floor rises as it retreats backward in the picture plane—reveals the vastness of the architectural interior. Additionally, here the photographers reintroduce the icon of the window, which was so pervasive throughout The Ruins of Detroit, repeated in rectangular grids and concentric semicircles across the picture.
plane in the upper third of the composition. The light the windows admit casts raking shadows over the rows of red velvet seats and emphasizes the materiality of the space, which is more pervasive in this scene than in many others throughout the portfolio. As in Detroit, the dust and debris in the theater are crucial to the mournful quality of the image; the layers of grime help to convey the length of time for which the space has been abandoned and impart a feeling of melancholia to the scene. The dramatic nature of the light streaming through the windows heightens the intensity of the image’s affect. The theater’s abandonment is made more palpable by the prominence of the audience seats. We are reminded of the capacity and purpose of the space to hold hundreds of people at one time, and yet here it holds none—at least, none who are visible. A translucent, gossamer fabric drapes over a cluster of seats, on the far wall, and from the mezzanine, adding a ghostly quality and suggesting an incorporeal presence. The element of theatricality continues as a notion of earthly and spiritual issues arises in these liminal spaces.

In the context of the entire “Theaters” portfolio, Fabian Theater, Paterson and Upper Auditorium, Proctor’s Theater stand apart from the more deadpan representations of architectural spaces which are more prevalent throughout the collection. However, the fact that the more dynamic images are fewer in number than the straight-on depictions of the stage and surrounding details may be seen as enhancing their import. In a collection in which the standard is rather detached images of straightforward subject matter, the introduction of dramatic camera angles, active lines, and emphasis on materiality makes these latter photographs all the more appealing and prominent in the portfolio. By breaking the formula that emphasizes the performance space and proscenium arch, Marchand and Meffre remind the viewer of the great number of people who once inhabited the spaces, thus instilling a more palpable sense of
abandonment. The interspersing of such poignant images among the comparatively stark ones introduces an overall mood of nostalgia.

One image, Pantheon Theater, Vincennes, IN (2011) does not fall strictly into either category of architectural photographs as I have previously discussed them: it is neither a straight-on recording of the space and proscenium arch, nor one shot at an angle, thus rendering the space more actively and dramatically (Fig. 16). Pantheon Theater falls somewhere between the two approaches, exhibiting characteristics of both and achieving a singular effect. This photograph does exhibit a flattened picture plane, but rather than examining the stage area, Marchand and Meffre direct the viewer’s attention to the wall perpendicular to the proscenium arch (which is featured on the left side of the composition) and a screened balcony box positioned above an arched doorway. The wall opposite the camera shows extreme amounts of plaster decay and mold or mildew. Straight and curved lines divide and activate the composition, which further differentiates it from the formulaic images of performance spaces. Temporary wooden picket fences enter the frame at left, screening the stage surface and orchestra pit from view. The angle of the lower fence is mirrored by a ribbon of yellow police tape stretching across the lower right portion of the composition. In this photograph, the low perspective, close-up examination of surfaces, and break from the aforementioned Sugimoto-like formula instead liken Pantheon Theater to the more dynamic architectural photographs. Although the mood established in this image is quieter and less dramatic than in Fabian Theater, Paterson and Upper Auditorium, Proctor’s Theater, this third composition demonstrates a rather more somber pointing toward the decay of the space and the ephemeral nature of its grandness.

The remaining image of interior space is Lincoln Theater, Los Angeles (ca. 2005-2013), a photograph which is an outlier not only within the “Theaters” collection but in Marchand and
Meffre’s entire body of work (Fig. 17). Lincoln Theater now serves, evidently, as a church, and as such Marchand and Meffre photographed the stage and audience space in the orchestra level from the mezzanine during a service to demonstrate its contemporary function. In addition to the fact that this theater does not exhibit any signs of decay, Lincoln Theater, Los Angeles stands in blatant contrast to all other images published by Marchand and Meffre in that the presence of people contributes significantly to the photograph’s composition. Here we observe a minister and church staff, likely a choir, on the stage itself and a congregation in the orchestra seats with upraised arms, bearing witness. For the first time, the photographers specifically record not just evidence of people having been present in the past, but those who use the space for the role it now serves. Additionally, a figure in motion in the mezzanine at left is captured in a ghostly blur. Again we are presented with metaphysical connotations of life and death, ephemerality, and the progression of cycles.

The final category of photographs in “Theaters” is comprised of images with narrower compositions featuring objects and icons of the theater culture. Only three photographs of the nineteen that comprise “Theaters” fall into this grouping. They are Exit 3, Casino Theater, Bronx, New York (2009); Projectors, RKO Keith’s Richmond Hill Theater, Queens, NY (2006); and Fly System, Proctor’s Theater, Newark, NJ (2007). These compositions, in contrast to the larger collection of sweeping spaces and grand architecture, are quiet, nostalgic, and arguably those that offer the most tangible evidence of abandonment of any of the portfolio’s images. These photographs, interspersed seemingly randomly throughout the online portfolio, interrupt the array of open spaces and decaying elegance and present the viewer with more private, smaller, and more closed-in spaces containing the once-functional, now-extraneous articles of the theaters’ former vitality. As a result, Marchand and Meffre repeatedly present the viewer
with a strikingly secluded scene that has the effect of dampening the general grandeur of the collection’s vast spaces and instead encourages nostalgia for the theaters’ lost functions.

One of these photographs, *Exit 3, Casino Theater, Bronx, New York*, features an old-fashioned exit sign, splintered and gaping in places where its surface has deteriorated (Fig. 18). Behind the glass sign, which announces “EXIT 3,” the faded, red-violet brocade fabric wall covering has fallen away in the upper left corner of the composition, reminiscent of the *Gunkanjima* image *Apartment, Apartment Complex 16-20* in which the corner of the calendar page obscures a portion of the woman’s eye. As in that photograph, the brocade fabric in *Exit 3, Casino Theater* drapes over the corner of the exit sign, revealing behind it a stained and flaking gray wall. A band of peeling paint weights the bottom of the composition, lending to the image the ever-present materiality characteristic of Marchand and Meffre’s work. This piece is flat, featuring a shallow depth of field, and unlike the previously-discussed images, it narrows the field of view to include only this vignette of a very minor portion of the theater space. Marchand and Meffre thus bring the viewer’s attention inward and toward a small icon of the formerly grand theater. The exit sign and brocade fabric nostalgically represent the style and culture of a bygone era, of Casino Theater’s former life.

A more obvious icon of theater culture and function is the commercial film projector depicted in *Projectors, RKO Keith’s Richmond Hill Theater, Queens, NY* (Fig. 19). Photographed in what was presumably their original home, the projection room, two huge projectors stand amid grime and debris. A film reel sits rejected on the floor. Photographed at eye level with a wide-angle lens, the space is distorted and exaggerated; the floor and ceiling both appear to tilt outward as they approach the frame of the image, creating a precarious effect of disorientation. As a result, we are able to view more of both surfaces, and therefore more
debris and decay, than necessarily we would otherwise. Here Marchand and Meffre effectively communicate a sense that this space has been long abandoned. The age and outmoded technology of the projectors, reel, and radiator heater in the background instill the image with a feeling of nostalgia for a bygone era. This icon of the twentieth-century entertainment industry conveys a sense of time halted.

The third photograph featuring objects of theater culture is *Fly System, Proctor’s Theater, Newark, NJ*, which depicts dense heaps of rope hanging in knots and mounds from their pegs, unfastened from the pulleys with which they were once used to manipulate curtains and scenery (Fig. 20). Whereas the icons present in *Projectors, RKO Keith’s Richmond Hill Theater* signify the cinema, this particular image is a representation of stage productions, the other use to which theaters such as this were originally put. Set against a background of exposed brick painted white, these ropes are now pooled in a thick layer of dust and grit on the floor of the wing (the portion of the theater on either side of the stage). Unlike the proper arrangement for stage rigging—tied in neat rows joining the hooks on the wall to the pulleys near the ceiling, these ropes hang lifeless and disconnected, abandoned, in disarray on the floor. The strength and efficiency with which they would typically support bulky and heavy stage components are now lost.

This photograph more than any other in the portfolio reminds the viewer of the people who manipulated these theater items. To raise and lower curtains or other objects with the rigging is a demanding physical endeavor. The very nature of these ropes is to be controlled by human hands, and the sight of them discarded and slack calls to mind the fact that they are no longer handled by anyone, that the stage and building are not put to their intended use—or, perhaps, any use whatsoever. Although such structures as theaters would by their public nature
not hold items of personal or private value, with *Fly System, Proctor’s Theater*, Marchand and Meffre manage to convey the absence of people by the emphasis on that which is no longer put to use and which has been so casually abandoned.

With “Theaters,” Marchand and Meffré demonstrate the ways in which the inclusion of a few images of small objects in a larger collection of detached architectural studies can emphasize the potential nostalgia in those spaces. In such images, as we have seen with *Exit 3, Casino Theater; Projectors, RKO Keith’s Richmond Hill Theater; and Fly System, Proctor’s Theater*, Marchand and Meffre portray each of these iconic objects dramatically—unlike many of the photographs of overall interior spaces—by using warm, directional lighting, the source of which exists outside the image frame. “Theaters” demonstrates the way in which the artists use a few poignant indicators of humans having once been present to startlingly remind us of their palpable absence among the scenes of vast, sweeping, abandoned spaces and the decay that has occurred in the intervening era. In their larger bodies of work, *The Ruins of Detroit* and *Gunkanjima*, this pattern is not as easily recognizable, for at 186 and seventy-two images, respectively, the comparatively infrequent occurrence of handheld items relative to architectural spaces is less apparent. With a smaller portfolio, however, “Theaters” acts as a microcosm of the photographers’ method of representing a given type of abandoned spaces.

The selective zooming in on personal or necessarily human-related items communicates Marchand and Meffre’s attention to the people who once inhabited these now-vacant places, and thus a different sense of melancholia to the artists’ professed interest in the architectural spaces themselves. It is Marchand and Meffré’s combined technical and compositional mastery that allows them to impart such dramatic import in a variety of stylistic approaches and to strikingly different effects. The pair is capable of conveying sublimity in an empty and dusty ballroom, of
establishing apprehension with the presentation of a child’s toy, and of eliciting a sense of nostalgia for people never pictured, primarily through their sophisticated use of the photographic frame and available light. Marchand and Meffre’s focused portfolio demonstrates a calculated and yet seemingly natural technique for honoring the nameless and faceless people who once inhabited these now-empty spaces.
Fig. 1 Proctor’s Theater, Newark, ca. 2005-2013, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 190 x 150 cm
Fig. 2 Westlake Theater, Los Angeles, ca. 2005-2013, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 3 Loew’s Kings Theater, New York, ca. 2005-2013, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 4 Paramount Theater, Brooklyn, NY, 2008, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 5 Eagle Theater, New York, 2009, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 6 RKO Dyker Theater, New York, ca. 2005-2013, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 7 Loew’s 46th Street Theater, Brooklyn, NY, 2007, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 8 Central Park Theater, Chicago, ca. 2005-2013, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 9 Loew’s Palace Theater, Bridgeport, CT, 2007, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 10 *Mezzanine, Uptown Theater, Chicago, IL*, 2009, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 11 *Uptown Theater, Philadelphia, PA*, 2009, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 12 *Fabian Theater, Paterson*, ca. 2005-2013, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 13 *Kenosha Theater, Kenosha, WI*, 2009, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 14 Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Cabot Street Cinema, Massachusetts*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 in.

Fig. 15 *Upper Auditorium, Proctor’s Theater, Newark, NJ*, 2006, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 16 Pantheon Theater, Vincennes, IN, 2011, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm

Fig. 17 Lincoln Theater, Los Angeles, ca. 2005-2013, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150 x 190 cm
Fig. 18 Exit 3, Casino Theater, Bronx, New York, 2009, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 150x190 cm
Fig. 19 Projectors, RKO Keith’s Richmond Hill Theater, Queens, NY, 2006, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 190 x 150 cm
Fig. 20 Fly System, Proctor’s Theater, Newark, NJ, 2007, “Theaters,” Ultrachrome print, 190 x 150 cm
CONCLUSION

In Ruins

Marchand and Meffre are collaborative partners whose combined understanding of the technical, aesthetic, and philosophical aspects of their work and dedication to their specific oeuvre have gained them recognition beyond the likes of many other practitioners of urban decay photography. Unlike self-proclaimed “urban explorers,” Marchand and Meffre do not simply photograph to record their meanderings amongst urban ruins; rather, they travel to abandoned sites all over the world, typically making several trips for the explicit purpose of making artistic photographs. Through their sensitivity to the concepts of time and ephemerality, interest in the aesthetic and sociological import of the architecture of societies, and pictorial and theoretical affiliations with canonical artists such as Jean Dubuffet, André Kertész, Eugène Atget, Aaron Siskind, and Hiroshi Sugimoto, Marchand and Meffre demonstrate their pronounced sophistication in dealing with the subject of urban ruins. Through the use of icons such as the clock and window, the theater, and the calendar; motifs of personal belongings and handheld or manipulated objects; and references to time, cycles, and spectacle, Marchand and Meffre evoke nostalgia and melancholia throughout their entire body of documentary photographs. Although their bodies of work feature very different subject matter, they are philosophically united by the photographers’ metaphorical inferences.

Despite the fact that nowhere do Marchand and Meffre voice socioeconomic or political motivations for making these kinds of photographs, their images can and may serve as catalysts in the consideration of social policies. Consumerism, poverty, fossil fuel depletion, and other
concerns can be interpreted in photographs such as these and, whether or not these issues acted as motivators for the artist, the work may spur positive change.

Marchand and Meffre convey feelings of melancholia for the change of eras and the fall of empires evidenced by their photographs, but they do not desire to change the states in which their ruins have come to exist:

You have to accept the way they are. It's a cycle, it [reminds] you how fluctuant and ephemeral things are. Ruins are a kind of humanization of architecture, the fragility [makes] them closer [to] us. [It makes] those structures which can be perceived as strong inanimate and cold being really moving [. . .] We are optimistic, once a building is still standing, it has hopes to be reused, and you can still look at it. There is nothing more depressive than an empty lot.65

Marchand and Meffre are hopeful for the futures of their many ruins. As long as the buildings they recorded—such as Michigan Central Station, the Packard Motors plant, the Wurlitzer and Metropolitan Buildings, Cass Technical High School, the Cathedral Manor apartments, the Highland Park police station, Broderick Tower, the many towering structures of Gunkanjima, and theaters throughout the United States—stand, the artists perceive them as still participating in an active cycle of life, of use and reuse, and of potential for the future. “We will keep working on various places all related to ruins and cities,” they write. “Photography is [a] very good way to travel, record, discover and thus try to understand the world as it is, even if it's sometimes hard to look at.”66

65 From an unpublished interview, provided to me via email by Marchand on November 3, 2013.
66 Ibid.
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