

# Dirty Pictures

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The imagery in Johannes Kahrs's paintings, though based on recognizable photographic sources, is always eerily unfamiliar. A disquieting strangeness seems to lurk under the skin of each picture, conveying a sense of things unknown, of perspectives that we customarily shut out from the confines of consciousness. This is true of his seemingly banal images—a leg resting on a bed, say—as well as those that refer to scenes of terror and disaster. The artist's penchant for murky penumbral compositions imbues much of his work with a noir-ish cast, but this is not what really disturbs us. Instead it is the way that his pictures unhinge our superficial intimacy with their apparent subject matter. The artist's whole conceptual and pictorial approach seems designed to remind us that an image does not always signify what it appears to.

Consider Kahrs's monumental canvas *Big men*, 2008. Executed in muted black-and-white tones, it depicts two black men stranded on a patchwork, hole-ridden rooftop amid a scattering of their personal belongings. Kahrs based this painting on a photograph taken in New Orleans in the wake of 2005's devastating Hurricane Katrina, when widespread flooding forced the evacuation of most of the city's population and the poor, elderly, and sick were some of the last residents to be airlifted to safety. But rather than treat his subject in the conventional terms of latter-day history painting, Kahrs effectively de-dramatizes the image. He obscures the outlines of objects and crucial details, including the facial features of the two main figures.

In every respect, in fact, the painting directs us away from the catharsis of contemplating a calamitous spectacle. Instead it leads us into corridors of uncertainty. The picture's perspective is distinctly ambiguous: whereas the source photograph was taken from above, presumably from a news or rescue helicopter, the painting evinces an unsettled spatiality. On first glance we do not seem to be looking down on the figures so much as confronting them head on. Consequently we have no sense of surveying the scene from a definitive perspective. This is reinforced by the artist's inclusion of several vertical and horizontal lines that correspond to the taped-together seams of his collaged source image (composed from cut-up sections of the original photograph). Meanwhile, the work's non-hierarchical composition leaves us with no central focal point. Figure and background are rendered with a similar attention to detail. Our gaze scans the picture's surface without pausing for long on any one spot.

Refusing to dramatize the disaster, Kahrs resists depicting the "big men" in his picture as psychological characters and instead focuses on conveying a physical sense of their predicament. Sprawled out on the roof, their immense bodies conjure the bulk of beached whales. An abandoned crutch, resting near the uppermost figure like a discarded bone, reinforces an atmosphere of immobility. But despite their dire circumstances they recline in postures that call to mind a leisurely relaxation (one figure's leg even casually dangles over a hole in the roof). Kahrs's picture thus prompts us to wonder why these men appear to be so oblivious, as if they were accustomed to being marooned. Perhaps such a state has characterized not just this particular moment, but also their past and future lives. The majority of New Orleans's black population, after all, had long been trapped in a barely sustainable situation of poverty and social marginalization. This is the social disaster that Katrina revealed to the world.

Through its play with established conventions Kahrs's painting also implies something about how we look at the world around us. If we focus on the singular and dramatic incident—as the news media routinely does—we end up missing the bigger picture. If we lose sight of the underlying ground, then we fail to see how things are connected in a broader sense. The point of Kahrs's oblique pictorial strategies—including his penchant for blurring faces or cutting them out of the picture altogether—is precisely to oppose this tendency by inviting us to scan an expanded field of significance, to find information in places other than where we are accustomed to looking.