

# aperture

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## strange bedfellows

Martina Mullaney's "Turn In" series abstracts rooms of worn-out beds in bleak temporary accommodations into faded bands of color. We see signs of anonymous and absent sleepers in the stains, dents, and creases that mark these degraded spaces. The subtle pathos of Mullaney's photographs hinges in part on the dismal inadequacy of these night shelters: a last resort in the yearning for comfort—a thousand troubles away from the luck, normalcy, and love that determine where we privileged others lay our heads to sleep. But "Turn In" resolutely does not depict the inhabitants of these shelters, and this brings Mullaney's narrative into the realm of universally felt and understood experience. The physicality of the rooms' details triggers a visceral response to this aberrant version of that familiar point where a bed meets the wall. Mullaney worked in shelters and soup kitchens over the course of two years, but her photographs are not simply empathetic representations of homelessness; rather, the images of "Turn In" embody our fears and deepest understanding of loneliness.

"Turn In" walks a photographic tightrope between the literal illustration of Mullaney's ostensible subjects, night shelters, and a highly aestheticized vision of them that would defuse the visual charge of their grim reality. Although she is a relative newcomer, this young Irish photographer has already been cited as continuing traditions within recent, especially Irish and British, art (consider, for example, the parallels with Rachel Whiteread's minimalist transformations of ordinary, abandoned objects). The important reshaping of new documentary photography—dealing with the consequences of political troubles and warfare—is likely also an influence on Mullaney's practice. Photography gleams from the aftermath of human tragedies, in the scarification of landscapes and buildings, those subtle tropes of the human condition. But, while this placement of Mullaney's project affirms its connection with socially aware art practice, it's clear that she is not motivated by the formal values of "documentary photography

as art" so much as by the opportunity it offers for communicating the *universality* of loneliness.

It took Mullaney two years to resolve how to distill her photographic approach for "Turn In." From the outset of her time working at hostels and soup kitchens in Cardiff in Wales, she was conscious of the fragility of many of the people she met who had drifted into homelessness, as well as of her self-assigned role as witness-bearer, which set her apart from other support workers and volunteers. "Turn In" followed from a more autobiographical project, "Dinner for One," which depicts the remains of dinners eaten alone in the homes of single people whom Mullaney met while working in a pub. In line with the lonely beds of "Turn In," the interiors of Mullaney's earlier series show the reality of dining without love or companionship.

When asked about what loneliness means to her, Mullaney replies in her disconcertingly soft voice that it is "simply having no one to turn to—no phone number to call, no family to look after you. Living but knowing that it makes no difference if you exist or not. It's as stark as that." Similarly, "Turn In" combines its chilling, sparse statement with a gentleness of delivery that makes the series's narrative doubly affecting. In these naturally lit scenes of institutionalized solitude, we read the *lack* of all the things that keep us from loneliness: comfort, cleanliness, permanence, cohorts.

The strangely lyrical quality in these photographs stems largely from Mullaney's choice of formal composition. While there is enough detail for us to be constantly aware of the nature of these rooms, the division of space into essentially two bands mimics that of land and sky in traditional landscape art. The eye reaches a horizon of sorts, only to meet with the impasse of a stained wall—making a sharp psychological impact. The sense here is of little hope for what, if anything, lies ahead. Like shorelines swamped in heavy mist, or the hemmed-in skylines of the inner city, the spaces of "Turn In" embody, in a profound and elegiac way, the loneliness that we endeavor to keep at bay. ●

BY CHARLOTTE COTTON PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTINA MULLANEY

# MODERN PAINTERS

May 2005

2002, from the series  
*Turn In*, C-print

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YOGGI MILO GALLERY, NEW YORK



## DEPARTMENTS

- 20 **Editor's Letter**  
KAREN WRIGHT
- 24 **Diary**  
Find Language for Doubt  
MATTHEW COLLINGS
- 28 **New York**  
The Emperor's New Paintings  
JERRY SALTZ
- 32 **Photography**  
Erotic Wonderland  
VINCE ALETTI
- 36 **Film**  
Soporific Celluloid  
JONATHAN ROMNEY

## VIEWS

- 40 **Herford**  
Back to front on Goebenstraße  
MARK RAPPOLT
- 43 **New York**  
All smiles in Central Park  
KAREN WRIGHT

## EMERGING ARTISTS

- 48 **Pushing All The Right Buttons**  
Martin Le Chevallier's video art  
CHRISTOPHER MOONEY
- 50 **Some Notes Towards the Exhaustion of Photography**  
Martina Mullaney's *Turn In*  
JONATHAN T. D. NEIL
- 52 **An Extra Ordinary Performance**  
The actions of Mark McGowan  
J.J. CHARLESWORTH



1. *Turn In* (2002) names a series of large-scale colour photographs showing the flop-house beds and hostel interiors that intermittently shelter the homeless populations of Cardiff and Dublin. The images themselves are composed according to a rigorous formalism: four-foot-square print, upper two-thirds to three-quarters all wall, bed at bottom, natural lighting, sharp focus. The only variables are the walls' colours, chips and scratches, and the mattresses' covers, spreads and patterns. The logic of the series is clear; it is about limiting options.

2. Americans, as if developing a reaction formation to binary oppositions, no longer appear content to live here *or* there; it's now here *and* there, with second, and even third homes. If being 'bi-coastal' is the pinnacle of this 'and', then no little irony attaches itself to Martina Mullaney's first solo show in the

United States. For how else is one to approach a series of photographs, the ostensible subject of which is 'homelessness', when the show itself has two homes: the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco and the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York?

3. Mark Durden, in an otherwise astute essay on the ethics of documentary photography and Mullaney's flirtation with its strategies, points to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled* (1991), the artist's billboard of a slept-in bed, as an important precedent for Mullaney's photographic iconography. But Gonzalez-Torres' bed was shared. The identical soft indentions in its neighbouring pillows are a testament to this, and to the politics that attend to the rituals of sleep, private though they seem to be. 'A single bed,' Mullaney notes, 'is not designed to be shared; it is intended for the solitary

sleeper.' A reminder that shelter and discipline go hand in hand, especially when administered by the state.

4. For art historian Leo Steinberg, Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955) indexed a fundamental shift in painting's mode of spectatorial address. From the vertical veil of the picture plane, Rauschenberg's work brought painting down to the mattresses of what Steinberg called the 'flatbed horizontal'. It is tempting to read Mullaney's photographs according to such a confrontation between vertical and horizontal registers, between the wall as the analogue of vision and the bed as the analogue of the unconscious. But her pictures are at once too shallow and not shallow enough for such a reading: too shallow insofar as any and all psychic depth is pressed out of the thin and nearly absent pro-filmic space; not shallow



# Emerging Artists

## Some Notes Towards the Exhaustion of Photography

Martina Mullaney's *Turn In*

by Jonathan T.D. Neil

enough insofar as that absence is immanent, and it is not too difficult to tell that the marks and scratches belong to the surfaces of the walls and not to the photographs.

5. The dialectic of appearance and reality, of surface and depth, is a hallmark of modernist painting, and its spectre haunts Mullaney's prints. But another spectre is present, too. *Turn In* appears bent not on pictorial aestheticization but upon photographic serialization. In this, it follows in the steps of Bernd and Hilla Becher's feverishly archival taxonomy of Europe and North America's shared industrial architecture, but Mullaney's images capture an alienation of a different sort. Homelessness, after all, is a category for industrialized nations.

6. Serialization doubles the absence of the photographic subject. Like Uta Barth's skilful use of focal length to absent the

place of the subject in her 'backgrounds', as in series such as *Ground* (1994-7), the repetition of Mullaney's empty beds, or even the empty plates of her earlier work, *Dinner for One* (1999), point to the place where subjects should be but from which they have been occluded, on both sides of the lens.

7. 'The tired person can no longer realize, but the exhausted person can no longer possibilize'. So wrote the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, as he approached the exhaustion of his own life due to a pulmonary condition. When exhausted, one is forced to confront that radical materialism which is the body, especially as it brushes against mortality. Exhaustion is a state of no options: it is not cancellation (what one chooses not to do, for instance, when one is tired), but foreclosure (what one cannot do, or even conceive of

doing): it is beyond possible. Perhaps it was only once confined to his single hospital bed, restrained by his own ill health, that Deleuze came to a full understanding of what it meant for life to take on the weight of what he would call 'pure immanence', or, following Beckett, 'the Exhausted'.

8. Like Beckett's 'Unnamable', the Exhausted defy representation. They are the system's surplus, its too much and its not enough. If Martina Mullaney's large-scale photographs figure such Beckettian exhaustion, then it is not solely because she was born in Ireland, nor because her photographs approach another unnamable through their thoroughly *unheimlich* domesticity; it is because only a series can be exhausted and, with *Turn In*, Mullaney has found the proper subject of, and a

All images  
Martina Mullaney *Untitled*,  
2002, from the series  
*Turn In*, C-prints





## THE NEW YORKER

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THE NEW YORKER, APRIL 18, 2005

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### PHOTOGRAPHY

#### MARTINA MULLANEY

A white box of tissues sits on a rumpled white bed-sheet close against a bare white wall in one of Mullaney's large color prints taken in homeless shelters and hostels in the U.K. These lonely pictures fuse a hardboiled documentary sensibility with an aesthetic finesse that constantly threatens to undermine the work. How can something so ugly—a soiled mattress, cracked plaster—be forced into an image that is so pretty? By leaving the people out of the frame and concentrating on the rumpled sheets and dirty blankets used day after day by who knows who, Mullaney avoids simply exploiting pathos. The wan greens or pinks of the walls are cut off by striped ticking or orange waffle-weave blankets two-thirds of the way down the images, all of which is unsailably beautiful and makes for a strong U.S. debut. Through April 30. (Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370.)



# the village VOICE

VOICE CHOICES MARCH 2-8, 2005

SPRING PHOTO

SPRING ARTS PREVIEW

**Martina Mullaney**  
**March 11-April 30**

*Yossi Milo Gallery, 525 W 25th, 212-414-0370.* Milo inaugurates its new ground-floor space with the New York solo debut of an Irish photographer who shows big color photos of empty beds. Made in hostels and temporary shelters in England and Wales, Mullaney's elegant, eloquent still lifes are understated records of absence and displacement, including fugitive traces of each bed's former occupants beneath painterly expanses of blank wall.