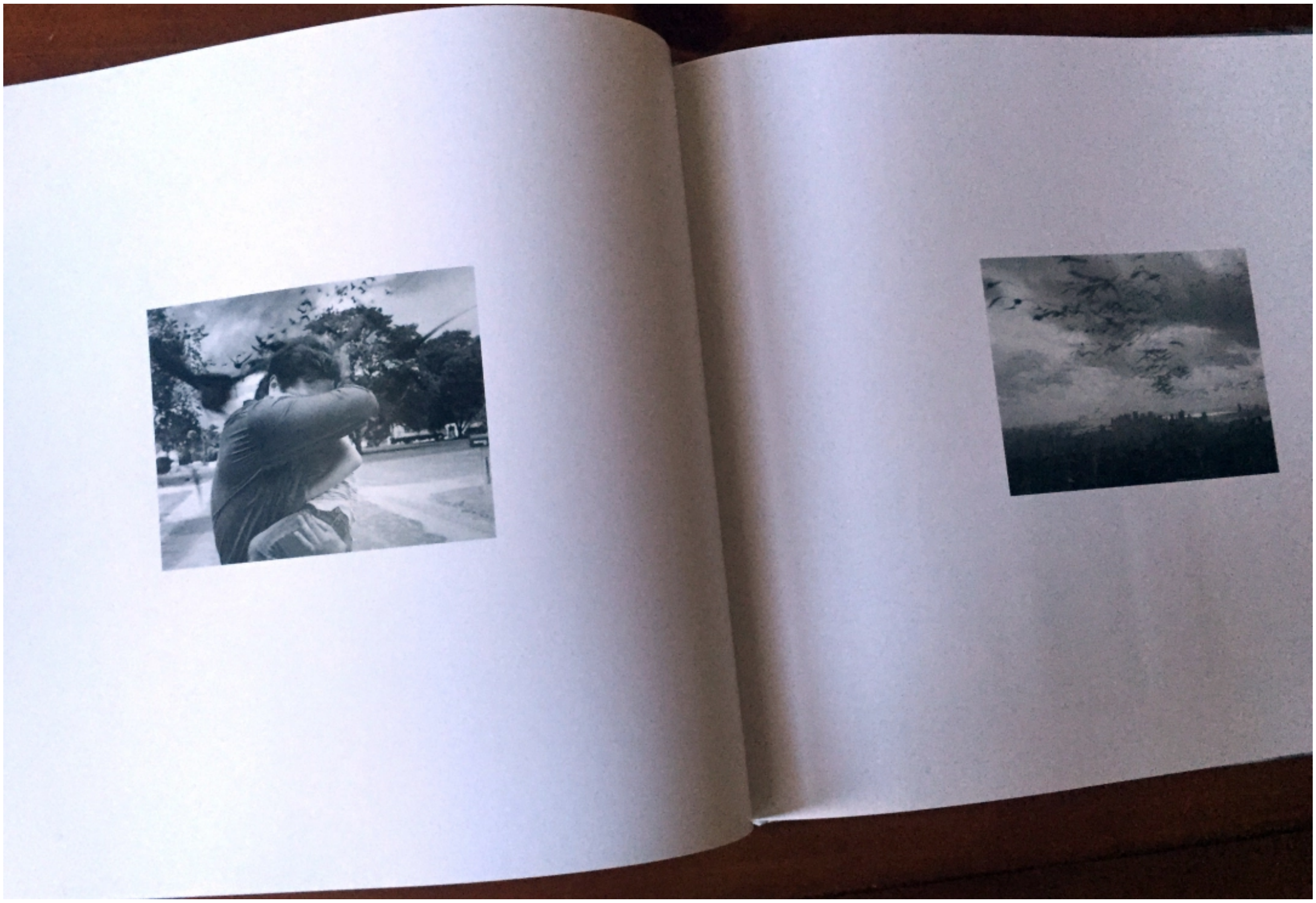
Such Mean Estate

Reviewed by Rachel Lyon

In our world, entertainment about apocalypse has taken the place of religious prophesy. We watch films about the end of the world and, even as we know that ocean levels are rising, species dying, populations booming, and resources dwindling, we enjoy the show.

Ryan Spencer is the street photographer of apocalypse films. He watches on his laptop with a Polaroid camera in hand. Sound off, sometimes he listens simultaneously to a soundtrack of his own design, an unrelated album evocative of a feeling similar to what he wants to tease out. There are advantages to being a street photographer of movies. You can slow down and stop time. You can rewind. Finding a picture he wants to capture, Spencer pauses the movie, rewinds, and plays it forward again in slow motion until he finds the exact frame.

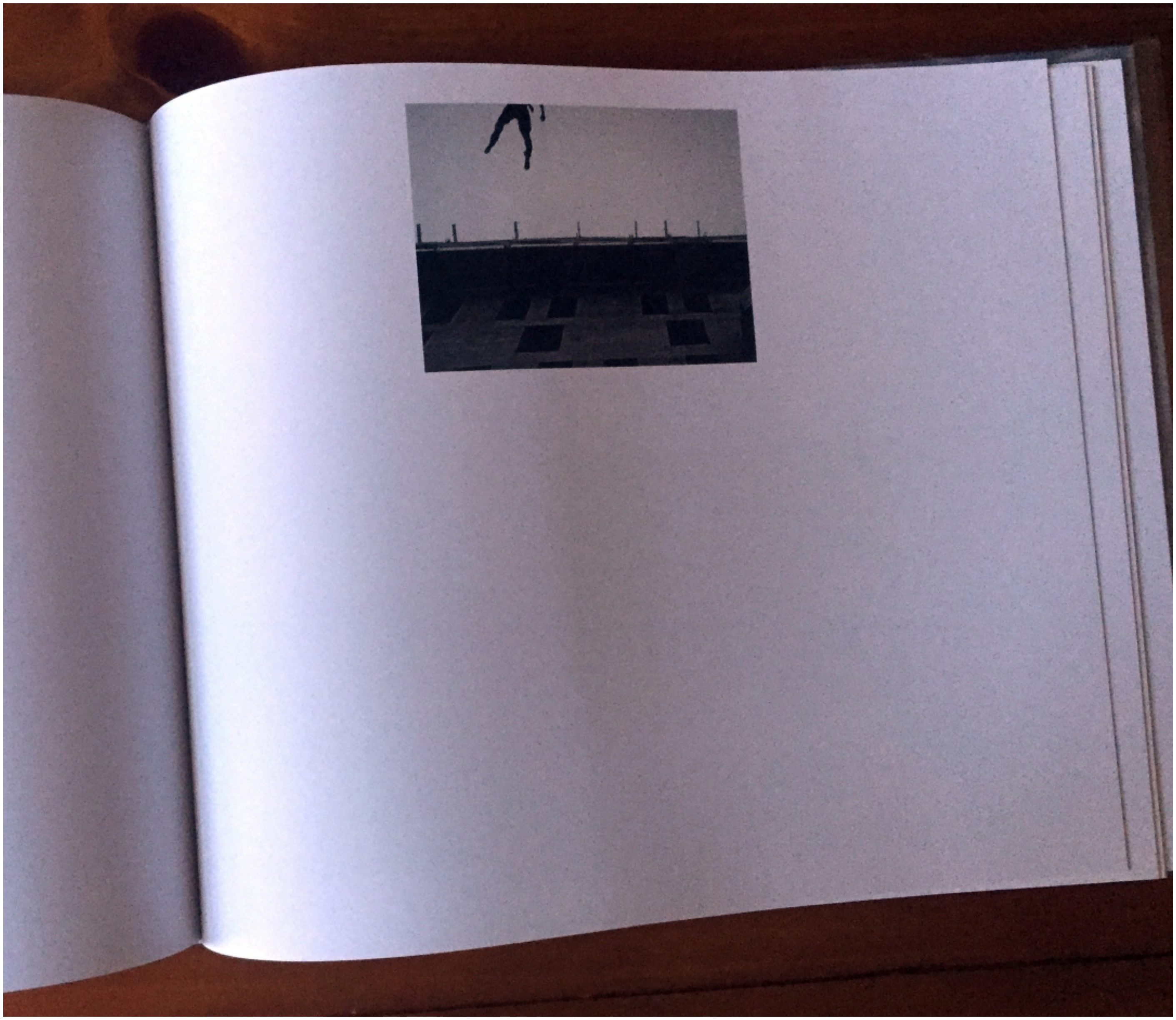
Such Mean Estate (Powerhouse, 2015) is a compilation of Polaroids collected through this process. The borderless, black and white, analog photographs—appropriated from digital, color movies—are reproduced on the pages of the book at actual size, 3 1/8 inches wide by 3 inches tall. They are arranged on each spread as photographic evidence might be laid out on a table: some lie on the top third of the page, some in the middle, some in the bottom third. One might appear alone, while a pair or a trio that somehow echo one another thematically or compositionally might appear together.



What are they evidence of? This collection of images, appropriated from the familiar movies, is an index of our shared cultural history. These are films that you and I have not just seen, but internalized; if we haven't specifically sat down and watched, say, *Dawn of the Dead* or *Mad Max* or *Resident Evil*, then we have watched comparable narratives of destruction. We have learned how to read images like these. Spencer has stayed away from paradigmatic shots, from those climaxes when fear is reaching fever pitch. These images are quiet, and perhaps because of their tranquility they are creepier than more climactic shots would be. Shafts and pools of foggy light obscure, but hint at, hidden threats. Silhouettes cower. Obscured faces look helplessly into explosions on the skyline. To page through *Such Mean Estate* is to be instructed in the ways that photographic composition, as well as human postures and gestures, can communicate fear.

The book begins with a section of text it refers to as an essay, by the inventive Leslie Jamison. Entitled "Catechism," this text is not in fact an essay so much as a creative collaboration. In a question-and-answer structure—wherein the questions are oblique, the answers complex and unsettling—she describes some of Spencer's images, and effectively evokes what one might imagine would be the anarchic chaos of the end of a world. It illuminates what piqued Jamison's interest in Spencer's work initially: his images' "narrative ambiguity." Explaining her approach in *The New Yorker*, where "Catechism" was published this past summer, Jamison wrote that the images, "suggested narratives but refused to make good on them, or declare them definitively. They weren't arranged into explicit narrative sequence, and I liked that. I had to move through them without taking refuge in any of the familiar stories."

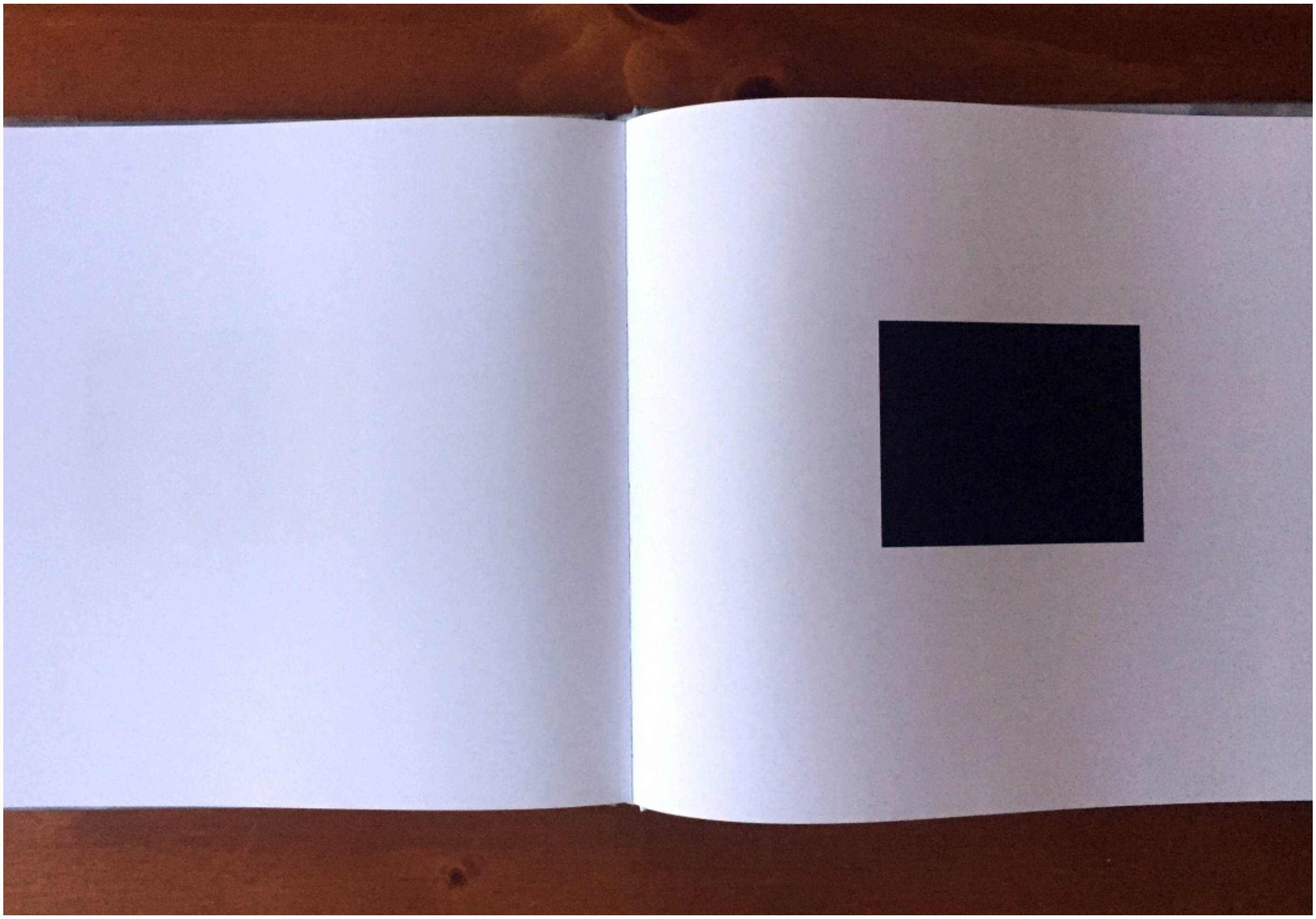
One does take refuge in a story, even in a horror story. Each of Spencer's displaced images, extracted from its apocalyptic narratives, dislocates what's scary from whatever context would help explain it. Taken alone, each of these images unmoors. Together they invite the viewer to consider how, in the context of apocalypse, time itself would begin to collapse. As the world ended, time would slow to a stop. Everything would become exactly as important and as unimportant as everything else.



With this in mind, one suspects the project could be more successful as a website or an installation—some context wherein all the images could somehow exist at once. Simply by virtue of appearing in a book, the collection of images in *Such Mean Estate* cannot be experienced outside of time. As one 'reads' from front cover to back, though no words at all—and not even page numbers—appear on the interior pages, the sequence becomes a narrative. It must. The result is an evasive visual story collaged together from different sources. (Fittingly for such an amalgam of apocalypse, Spencer chose an epigraph from Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*: "…my mind was intently fixed on the consummation of my labour, and my eyes were shut to the horror of my proceedings.")

So there is a story—and it has chapters: Spencer and the book designer Takaaki Okada organized *Such Mean Estate* into sections, each of which begins with a single 3 1/8 x 3-inch frame in the middle of a page that acts as a sort of chapter heading. The space within these frames becomes darker over the course of the book: the first is white, the second is light gray, the third is darker gray, and so on. In the first chapter, chapter white, we see the first signs of the apocalypse: a flock of birds—no, not a flock, a swarm—threatens to block out the sun. We see people alone in a once populated world: A boy looks out at a mostly empty landscape where one lone horse, saddled but riderless, stands grazing. At the side of a road a man stands with a ladder and a paint bucket before a message that he's inscribed on an old billboard: "AM I THE ONLY PERSON LEFT ON EARTH?"

As white becomes gray, things get worse. The apocalypse is here. You can tell by the landscape. Dead trunks of trees reach up into a clouded sky, bristling with the porcupine remnants of their branches. A parking lot bristles in turn with the static silhouettes of the unfed undead. You can tell by the fact that you are all alone, or one of very few. Two silhouettes stumbling uphill. A girl running through destroyed streets, holding her own dismembered arm. The gray darkens. By rowboat two figures head toward the fog. With flashlights four figures slog through a deep flood in the rain. A lone plane flies over the destroyed and smoldering Hollywood sign. The city is emptied. Helicopters fill the sky. The gray becomes darker yet. One by one, overseen by military, people file into a makeshift hospital. One balding man looks over a blazing city. One wounded woman looks over a suburb on fire. In the chapter *darkest gray*, a man walks alone in a landscape that is all sand. A woman leaves. A fire smolders. The book ends with *chapter black*, after which there are no pictures at all.



The gradual cinematic fade-to-black is also the most basic visual story of apocalypse. Think of Matthew 24:29 —"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken"—and recall, for a moment, the terrifying incomprehensibility with which catastrophes unfold in the Bible, the helplessness with which the end of the world must be faced. On an individual level, the human characters in the Bible are responsible for themselves; they can sin or behave righteously, and they will be punished or rewarded accordingly. But they are never responsible for the end of the world itself. Whether a seven-headed beast will rise out of the sea, as in Revelations, or the sun should be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, as in Joel, the source of Biblical apocalypse is simple. It is God.

Today, carrying the weight of responsibility for global warming, we also carry the weight of the end of the world. In selecting the films he uses, Spencer told Jonathan Lee in *Guernica* last year that he chose "specifically those which had some environmental or ecological plot or message… a cataclysmic storm, or bee swarm, or rampaging virus… an enemy that is irrational, unpredictable, and larger than life." By training his lens on films about pandemic and climate change, he's homed in on a very real, very contemporary cultural preoccupation: the awareness of the potential effects of our actions as a species on the fragile planet on which we live. Spencer's apocalypse is a man-made thing. This is apocalypse that we've invited in.

If popular films are the 'texts' of our new, shared, cultural-spiritual experience, then Jamison's "Catechism" is an appropriate incantation. And Spencer's fetishizing process—watching each film over and over again, often quite slowly; rewinding to a given scene, and watching it again, often dozens of times, in slow motion—is a kind of meditation, a new kind of prayer. The old ways won't work anymore. Old prayer can't comfort us. And yet, *Such Mean Estate* seems to say that we don't want to be comforted. Jamison writes, "The form of a catechism held the structure of ritual—anchoring oneself in the face of the unknown—but this catechism [that I would write] wouldn't rest on easy articles of faith; rather than resolving uncertainties, it would throw them into sharper relief." We don't want our uncertainties resolved by way of narrative or fictionalization, this book says. What we want is to be made aware.

Ryan Spencer, with text by Leslie Jamison. *Such Mean Estate*. Powerhouse, 2015.

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