The Vicinity of Narrative

On his work desk in Oakland, California, Todd Hido arranges and rearranges a stack of his photographs alongside vintage shots that he found at a yard sale. These are the origins of *Excerpts from Silver Meadows*: a singular order that Hido makes out of his special brand of chaos. ‘When viewers arrive at a book of photographs, they’re expecting something that makes sense,’ he tells me. ‘But I think ambiguity is an incredibly important and powerful tool.’ So here he is, connecting disparate images to give shape to a precise uncertainty.

The end result will, of course, be this book, made up of many different elements and layers – different breeds of photographs that Hido has taken over the years, yes, but also pulp fiction covers and snapshots Hido took when he was twelve years old. These are asides not found in any of his previous, tightly edited monographs. Hido is deep in the work process when I ask him if this ‘departure’ is intentional: this incorporation of archival material and private moments captured on film years ago, or by someone else entirely.

‘It’s actually not a departure at all,’ he tells me. ‘I’ve been working like this since I first got to graduate school. Even then, it was my way of experimenting more.’ Still, he didn’t put these unusual combinations out into the world until three years ago, when he made ‘a little ’zine-like book published in Japan called *Nymph Daughters*.’ The book integrated, among other unexpected images, heart-shaped, hot pink spray-painted drips layered over seedy found personal ads. ‘It was one of the best projects I ever worked on.’

Excerpts from Silver Meadows is largely an extension of that same experimentation. ‘It’s a similar kind of risk-taking,’ says Hido, only he adds a clarification. Laughing, he says: ‘The difference now is that I have super-size gatefolds so that viewers have to sit their asses down and get off their phones to look through each page.’

This is a conversation we’ve been carrying on for give or take, 365 days: while meeting for various magazine interviews (I ask the Questions, he gives the Answers), or bumping into each other at photography events in Los Angeles and San Francisco, then continuing where we left off by phone. Ultimately, Hido and

I are always talking about these nebulous things that can't really be nailed down, like why photography books are necessary, and perhaps more importantly and less exactly, why photographs themselves are necessary, outside of their pragmatic usefulness. In response to hysteric prophecies that print is dead and libraries will all be digital come next decade, Hido often waves his hand in the international sign for skepticism: 'art and photography books aren't going anywhere,' he says. In their analog form, they allow viewers to hold onto something intangible; they give texture to recollections and a platform to interior worlds.

Perhaps it isn't surprising, then, that Hido's bookshelves, worktables and dining surfaces are carpeted with books. Some of them are fiction, like the seven Raymond Carver collections whose covers bear the tacit Midwestern landscapes and single family homes of Hido's photographs. Published by Vintage in 2009, Hido considers the project among the most significant of his career, so far. Other books include monographs, Hido's own published works, or dummy books for works in progress. The majority, however, are hard-covers by or about other artists and photographers, and Hido regularly quotes from them, savoring the relevance of a statement like the one made by Lewis Baltz in *Park City:* 'photography is a profound corner that sits in between literature and film.' Hido tells me he likes to loiter on this corner, and we return to it more times than one in our conversations, this time over the phone.

Hido is speaking from his home office by the bay, as I'm on the other end of the receiver in my Los Angeles apartment and the floor is shaking slightly, either by force of a small seismic wave or by my neighbor's hard slam of the door downstairs. Hido is explaining that the parameters of the still image allow him to build (and break) a very deliberate kind of narrative: 'I don't tell a complete story through a photograph,' he says, 'I suggest one.'

The calculated juxtapositions of Hido's photographs on a page or gallery wall smack of beginnings and endings, but because each photograph is broken from a conventional arc, determining whether that arc is tragic, comic or flat-lining altogether depends more on the reader, remarkably, than the author. So all of a sudden, the slam of a door in an apartment complex can be suggestive of an empty gust of wind as much as a violent private earthquake. The single-family home with a light on and a car

parked in the driveway can be suggestive of domestic monotony as much as a domestic disturbance. The young woman, topless, lying on the grimy blanket of a cheap American motel is symbolic, perhaps, of a chilling and depressing climax, but just as likely, she's an expression of the direct opposite – a sustained and habitual dormancy.

Hido speaks of his works in the language of memory, so that the holes and patches of an image are inherent to its finished composition. These are the rhythms of poetry or even pop songs, I think, as opposed to those of a novel. If Hido's photographs create a hierarchy, it's one in which plot ranks lower than atmosphere, and the topography of an American suburb – the fake wood paneling, the dated floral sheets – somehow mimics the furrows and expressions of the human face. Place is as much a character as the humans who occupy it, and equally as elusive. The eye adjusts while looking at a Hido photograph, as absence and presence compete for the foreground. Each image in a book or show becomes the equivalent of hearing five minutes of a stranger's hour-long conversation, of reading a shopping list left over in the cart, or a passage ripped from an anonymous diary: brevity captures intimacy, made all the more gripping for being nameless and incomplete.

'What I hear most often from people is: "This reminds me of…"' Hido tells me on a separate occasion, as we sit at his dining table and flip through art magazines heaped in the center like a main dish. 'People will tell me, "This reminds me of the town I grew up in, the house my girlfriend lived in, what the weather was like every day that I went to school."'

Hido remarks on how diverse these reactions are in tone and implication, even as they're held together by the same opening words. An image of small, detached homes under the grey skies and polluted snows of wintertime provoke the following two comments with like conviction:

'That's the most fucked up time I've ever lived through.'

'It's like a postcard from my happy past.'

A look back isn't always nostalgic, just as it isn't always locked in the past tense. In any case, the act of remembering happens in the present, and will, for better or worse, happen again in the future. Hido confesses that his images remind him of his own history, of his childhood and adolescence in his hometown of Kent, Ohio, of some of the most difficult times he's ever

lived through, as well as some of the most routine. This is the weather that serves as background to his oldest memories, these are the girlfriends whose subterranean bedrooms are found in so many basements of so-called flyover country, then and now. These are the three-story apartment buildings behind which teenagers ubiquitously smoke pot, drink cheap beer, and ash their cigarettes.

For the chance viewer, who knows nothing of Hido or his background, these images evoke a specific time and place, as well, but with margins of error that span decades and cross multiple state lines. In other words, seen through different eyes, these photographs might call to mind a time and place entirely separate from the one that Hido knows he's captured, and entirely separate from the ones that, say, the art critics contend to see. Maybe the definition of a 'universal' piece of art is one that fuels many subjective readings, but all of them argued with equal confidence.

Hido tells me he doesn't really want to 'go there,' anyway. He doesn't want to put a magnifying glass to the personal memory evoked by a particular face or landscape, and he doesn't want to title an old photograph of his father as 'Dad,' or explain why the body measurements his father kept as a young, body-building football player belong in this book of photographs. And Hido doesn't think it's absolutely necessary to go into any great detail as to why *Excerpts from Silver Meadows* is specific to the streets on which he grew up in Ohio, even as the photographs themselves may have been taken somewhere else.

But if Hido does return to 1970s suburban Ohio in his photographs, it is, in part, because he can't return to it otherwise. That Ohio no longer exists, though Hido still finds it in 'pockets of undeveloped land in Eastern Washington,' in the Sacramento River Delta during the winter months, or in the stretches of California's Central Valley on a rainy day: 'Those places are surrogates,' says Hido, for environments that are resigned to live on only in memory and vintage family albums. And yet Hido's photos aren't tethered to a past, either, and they certainly aren't 'reenactments.' Free of any indications of time, or worse yet, times gone by, they are without the maudlin effects of any metaphorical sepia tones. These photographs aren't wistful reminisces. If anything, they have the immediacy of unexpected and sometimes totally unwelcomed flashbacks, happening in real time.

'Much of the Ohio I grew up in has been plowed over by strip malls and Walmarts,' says Hido, but it nevertheless informs the backdrop of his works, and, whether or not a viewer knows this, it is the origin of what he calls his 'cast of characters': open spaces, empty living rooms, and anonymous expressions, among them.

Hido says he's the type of photographer who works on multiple projects at once, most often taking photographs to satisfy some sort of magnetism toward a specific image rather than to 'storyboard' a future collection. 'I don't just work for my projects,' he says, 'I work because I need to take a picture when I see it in front of me.'

A book or show often comes together much later in the process, sometimes years later, as Hido sifts through various photographs on his desk and finds the startling connections between them. This course of editing and combing through his works is one way that Hido constructs maps from his large bodies of photographs. Individually, these images might point in various directions like broken compasses. 'Without the book-making process,' says Hido. 'I would feel lost.'

Hido doesn't pluck quotes from just art and photography books; his references are equal opportunity, with reaches into the late-night radio shows he listens to while editing his photographs at 2am, 3am, or later. He absorbs the news reports and call-in talk shows that come on at those hours of the night and early morning. More than once, Hido has cited Freud's idea that 'sources of terror in childhood become sources of attraction in adulthood,' which the photographer says stuck with him after it was frequently repeated on the call-in radio show, *Loveline*, by host Dr. Drew Pinsky – known also as the de facto celebrity rehab specialist of our time.

Hido says the daily news inadvertently seeps into his photographs, as do, no doubt, infomercials and top-40 pop songs. What does the ear tune out between reports of murder trials, sex abuse scandals, and economic depressions? Advertisements for hardware stores going out of business. Clichéd lyrics about mundane traumas. Maybe that's the same gritty soundtrack playing in a room with a filthy carpet, in which a young woman sits on the nightstand stand with her legs drawn to her chest, her bright pink toenail polish chipped at the edges. Or maybe it's coming from the speakers of a car, which idles in park outside a mobile

home on a cold day. There's a child's bicycle overturned outside. Is this the soundtrack accompanying a car that's pulling into a bad habit, or one that's trying to escape it? And does the car belong on this street, in the first place?

'I started taking night shots nearly two decades ago,' Hido tells me. 'That's when I realized, if you want to take a photo, you don't knock on someone's door to ask permission.'

Hido says he keeps himself obvious, and if somebody calls the police, as has happened on occasion, he's quickly understood to be a photographer and not a criminal. 'You're allowed to take pictures in public,' Hido laughs. 'What's interesting, is that so many people regard their surroundings as inherently private.' His photographs certainly betray the defensiveness of particular settings – a place can be guarded, even aloof. In parallel, Hido considers his practice solitary and guarded, as well. 'I don't have assistants setting up lights for the perfect shot; I'm usually just outside or in my car, alone.'

If Hido is a character in his own photographs, then he's a taciturn one, camouflaging himself with his subjects rather than confronting or scrutinizing them. Even in those shots that show no human faces, there are markers of a wary human presence. Telephone poles and electric wires, the tracks of a car on an empty roadway, a discarded office chair on a small, muddy plot of land – these abandoned networks of communication, totems of what's kept close to the chest or hidden in plain sight.

Hido likes this one Dorothea Lange quote, which was later cited by photographer Robert Adams. 'Lange said that a photographer should go out and photograph "what exists and prevails," he tells me. 'And that's exactly what I want to do. I want to photograph what exists and prevails in modern America.'

Hido shoots many of his photographs from his car windows. When he goes on the road for a show or a lecture in the middle of rural America, or when he travels in search of those undeveloped stretches between the coasts (you're not in the Bay Area anymore!), he can't stay in his hotel room at night. 'I want to be out in the world,' he tells me, and so he goes out driving in the late hours of the night, parks somewhere and, using his dashboard as a desk, works on a new book, or reviews his photographs, turns up the music, rolls down a window to smoke a cigarette, and immerses himself entirely in the tension of a still night in a small town.

There’s something about the American roadside or the abandoned strip-mall parking lot that’s widely regarded as threatening under dark skies, and after hours. What are the cues, exactly, that prompt a person to lock the car doors and secure the house gates, when the streets are actually empty and the neighbor’s curtains quietly drawn? Hido’s photographs seem to test the strength of those locks, and peek through lowered, broken venetian blinds. When the doors fall open for the camera, or when the subject is on the interior side of those drawn blinds, the resulting images can feel a bit like an invasion – a too-long look at patterns of neglect or emptiness, at some kind of pathology or broken arrangement. And now the photograph becomes a preservation of a perishable item, well on its way to spoiling already. Then again, what am I saying? These are the postcards from someone’s happy past.

Inside his craftsman home in Oakland, Hido’s work studio is located on the second floor like a watchtower. From there, he keeps an eye out of his window, careful not to miss a moment when fog and dark clouds start to cover the San Francisco Bay. On this particular occasion, I join Hido clicking through work at his computer because it’s sunny and it’s still sunny, and he can’t go out and shoot when the world looks like this. After a while, Hido tells me about a residency he had in Marseilles some ten years ago. ‘It was the first residency I had ever done – and by telling you this I don’t want to cut myself off from future ones,’ he laughs, ‘so maybe I shouldn’t go on.’

Now you have to.

‘Well, I was really excited to get there, and to have a space to work and a room to hang my photographs in. Finally, I arrived and it was really interesting because Marseilles is a gritty city and very cool. But it was also very beautiful.’

I’m having trouble seeing the problem.

‘It was *too* beautiful. It was sunny. I wasn’t getting pictures that I could love.’

When Hido tells me he wasn’t in the right place, there, I know he doesn’t mean that geographically.

After some time, the sun begins to set and the inevitable convective clouds start to gather over Oakland. Hido motions that it’s time to go, picks up a Pentax he hasn’t used in a while, gives it a kiss and tells it, ‘I’ve missed you,’ then runs downstairs to his car. On the way out, he tells me about the

weekend tradition he has with his 10-year-old twins, a boy and a girl – if it's cloudy or raining, the three of them always go out for ice cream, not least so that Hido can snap a few shots on the way to the parlor.

The photographer is unfazed by the traffic, which is the stuff of comedy at this point, a caricature of gridlock, honking, swerving, and excessive swearing. After twenty minutes of exhaust smoke and fists out the window, Hido takes an abrupt turn off the highway and onto an unmarked, unpaved road. We're by the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza, on the other side of the Port of Oakland. Bordered by water on one side and giant bags of trash on the other, this is a strip of beautiful City By The Bay that Hido jokingly describes as 'a good place to dump a body, if you ever have to kill someone.'

The windshield is our thin line of separation from the garbage, the telephone poles, wires, and puddles left by a rising tide. From this angle, the bridge above us looks anonymous. In this iconic city, we've just arrived at almost any small town in America, and here we are, sitting in just about any car that's running under any bridge.

'I can't take photographs of pure nature,' says Hido. His landscapes are, in fact, adulterated by humans, their structures, and the litter they throw out of car windows. 'Because that's the world we live in,' he says. 'The view that I'm photographing doesn't exist unless you can drive up to it.'

Hido came to San Francisco in 1994 and, as a graduate student, worked closely with the late photographer Larry Sultan at the California College of the Arts. Hido says it was the best decision he's ever made, and brings up Sultan frequently in conversation. Now, he remembers something Sultan used to tell him – an observation Hido describes as 'perfect' – which was, 'Todd, you like to hang around in the vicinity of narrative.'

Here we are, then, in a vicinity, certainly. Within the immediate boundaries of a city that looks nothing like the place Hido is now committing to film. He leaves the car running in park and snaps photographs of ambiguity.

'This is a shitty place,' says Hido. 'So why is it so beautiful?'

Hido is documenting a setting far from the traffic of this dense metropolis, far from any Golden Gates or these specific bodies in motion, on their way home or to the gym or to a dinner reservation. So I ask Hido whether 'what exists and prevails' is

necessarily at odds with a narrative like this. However on the fringe or broken they may be, aren't all of his narratives inevitably works of fiction?

In reply, Hido takes out one of three water bottles that he keeps in his car, and he sprays the windshield. 'I've learned from sheer disappointment that sometimes I need to take pictures, but it isn't raining outside.' There's a difference between this and the real thing, he says, because of course, 'you can't get all Gerhard Richter without real rain.' Nevertheless, the end result is a reflection of an authentic atmosphere, and an environment that's unmistakably familiar. This photograph, like others, is a fabrication of something that honestly exists, if not as a physical state, then certainly a psychological one.

Sometimes Hido sprays glycerin on the windshield, for a different kind of effect. It's a technique he compares to changing paintbrushes. The size, direction and position of drops of water on the car window inform the photograph that results, and within these fictitious raindrops, Hido says he can 'compose' the picture that he wants to see, to the best of his ability. Because ultimately, the photograph is a composition – it is a way of creating, not of replicating.

Still, Hido is quick to clarify that while he 'crafts and composes,' his works are largely the product of impulse and spontaneity. 'I have a little bit of control over these images, but if I knew exactly what was going to happen each time I took a photograph, I would stop taking photographs,' he says. 'A crucial part of photography is the moment that you hold your breath and say, "I hope it turns out."'

Sometimes people him questions like, 'What filter do you use in PhotoShop?'

'Lady, I don't even know how to use PhotoShop,' he'll answer, give or take a level of politeness. 'I don't do anything digitally that I wouldn't do in the darkroom.'

Then Hido asks me a question that, really, I should be asking him: 'Help me decide,' he says. 'Does it matter that it isn't really raining right now?'

As much as it matters that there's a photographer taking the picture, I guess.

As a graduate student, Hido did an independent study with an art therapist. 'But I didn't want to cut out pictures for collages and talk about the choices I was making,' he says. 'I just wanted

an opportunity to talk about my photographs in a way that I couldn't in the classroom.' It turned out to be one of the most valuable experiences he's ever had. Hido says it confirmed that he was working on something 'real.' Or rather, he corrects himself, on something 'with real content behind it.'

'For example, I take photographs of houses at night because I wonder about the families inside them,' he says. 'I wonder about how people live, and the act of taking that photograph is a meditation.'

In the same breath, though, Hido tells me that he isn't a conceptual artist. 'Concept is highly over-rated, while beauty is a bad word,' he says. 'Well, I want beauty. I want emotion. I want to feel when I see a photograph; I don't necessarily have to think. I've seen concept cripple photographers.'

When he teaches as an adjunct professor, Hido says his strongest advice to students is, 'Just go take pictures, okay?' It's advice he's thankful he took from Larry Sultan, one evening, when he had a 25 page paper due on 'modern trends in contemporary art history.' Hido recalls standing in the darkroom with a stack of contact sheets, wanting nothing more than to print photos all night. Sultan, who'd just dropped by the doorway to see what Hido was up to, told his student, 'Just fucking print, then. Go print, if that's what you want to do. Don't do your paper.' And Sultan was right, says Hido. Today, that same sense of urgency and pulse seems to translate into Hido's photographs.

Though meditative, Hido's images also demonstrate a certain impatience, a kinetic tension. Hido does not photograph a figure or a landscape that sits still for the camera. Rather, he documents a reality that, by definition, changes even as it's being observed. Hido's photographs pick up on an anxious momentum, whether it's that of a branch sagging under rainwater, or that of a body aging as it goes in circles in a dead end. Time does go on, also in places that time supposedly forgot, and even inertia goes on with it. Torpor has its movements. And then, of course, there is the cadence of recollection to consider. No matter how vivid, it shape-shifts every time it enters, or rather intrudes upon, the mind. So Hido focuses in on the very things that can't stay in focus: faces as they change expressions, the paint chipping on a mobile home, the raindrops blurring the road ahead, habits as they're broken, patterns as they develop and decay, and memories as they're pushed from the mind, then creep back into it, like that rising tide by the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza.

Hido speaks of places far from Ohio as surrogates for a place in time that he can't physically visit again. His photographs are surrogates, too, I think, for memories and atmospheres that we can't physically share or even properly articulate. I suppose they're also surrogates for words, in the absence of just the right ones.

'I'm insatiable when it comes to looking for something, but I can't name exactly what I'm looking for,' Hido tells me. 'When the good stuff happens, it's intuitive, something you can't find if you know exactly what it is. In that way, it's all a bit like looking for human relationships and love,' he laughs. 'You don't find love if you're looking for it.'

When he began to work on *Excerpts from Silver Meadows*, Hido says he felt he was creating a book that would tell his story more candidly than do his previous works. When he looked up from his desk and saw the finished product, however, he understood that he had created something very different than what he'd anticipated.

So you don't feel that this book is your story, anymore? I ask him.

'No, it's still my story,' Hido says. 'But it's also just *a* story. And, really, isn't that much better?'

- Katya Tylevich