

## Perfection and Seduction: Xavier Comas' *SIX*

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The perfect photograph is precisely what photographic histories tell us has never been achieved. The medium was born of impreciseness – the production of the oldest surviving camera photograph by Nicéphore Niépce famously took hours, if not days and was barely legible. Controversies of the modern period have been compounded by the contemporary rise of digital technology: while photojournalists are sacked from their jobs or stripped of awards on discovery of doctored imagery, historians and critics have long-since highlighted the profoundly ideological nature of photography. In fact, digital photography is the lie that tells the truth: reflections of how we can think about the world but never quite the world itself. The proliferation of the digital and increasingly infinite possibilities for manipulation are testament to the very impossibility or even failure of photography to function transparently or effectively shape consensual understanding.

Artists, of course, know this. That is, those who play with and usually confound the affective possibilities of photographic reproduction by foregrounding the *aesthetic* rather than the *textual*. Such prompts experience over interpretation, the soliciting of senses more than perception and therefore complicating the process of “merely” consuming information.<sup>1</sup> Consumption that, anyway, could never be perfected, as it were and as the above paragraph sketches.

Xavier Comas's series *SIX* subtly understands relationships between the world of photography and the world itself, but paradoxically. *SIX* seduces us with their sense of aesthetic perfection: symmetrical compositions, the classical grandness of the black and white and abstracted forms. The photographs appear not as entities to be deciphered but beheld as spellbinding. However, on studying the intricate and glittering forms we may note that while they point inwards to the very condition of photography itself – pure light and frames that separate and isolate – they also point outwards to structures and signs: architecture, cosmology and proxies of the qualities of nature. The paradox of the series is this sleight between the appearance of “pure” form and yet the sense and aura of so much else. And Comas seems to aim to distract from such through seduction, a willingness to captivate with the play of light. Here is where his photographs hint at maleficence.<sup>2</sup> The potential loss of our interpretative faculty could only be controversial.

The title of this series, *SIX* announces perfection and also multiple routes of belief. A mathematically perfect number due to the harmonies of addition and multiplication with which one can arrive at this digit, it is also the smallest perfect number in this respect. God created man on the sixth day and as the supreme act of creation, and the sixth of the Ten

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Fisher 'Steve McQueen's Dialogues with the Image of Precarious Life,' 2014, n.p. URL: [jeanfisher.com/steve-mcqueens-dialogues-with-the-image-of-precarious-life](http://jeanfisher.com/steve-mcqueens-dialogues-with-the-image-of-precarious-life). Accessed on December 18 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard *Seduction*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Commandments forbids murder. Six is also the extra, special sense way beyond empiricism. Coma's photographs were taken in elevators in Japan, the title initially prompted by the typical number of interior planes that this liminal space provides. But the images he shapes are ephemeral and suggest other orders and geometries. Fantastical, and exceedingly elegant.

Comas used to ride the elevators in order to photograph the people of this tiny area. Prompted by the Japanese concept of *Ma* – a consciousness of the dynamic between mass and void – his pursuit of the intangible in this *non-place* – impersonal and transient – he was led to the extra dimensions caused by light, where light can blur the very relationship between tangible and intangible.<sup>3</sup> And the very liminality of this purportedly insignificant place now seems akin to a portal to other worlds; and just that, a portal: the edge of a view and the apprehension of a new visual language or new codes. Comas's discoveries here, however, were not by happenstance. His earlier adventuring in the high speed elevators of Tokyo's Nishi Shinjuku business by day and the slow lifts of the Kabukicho red-light district by night resulted in a working series titled *6<sup>th</sup> Floor* in 2010. Something strange was always seen and felt on that particular landing, including opening to a brick wall or coming upon a corridor of doors of different heights or a disconcerting totem. These experiences carried an indeterminable aura, and Comas felt the invisible presence of others. Like his book project *House of the Raja* (2014), the culmination of years of visiting the ruin of a wooden palace in Thailand's Deep South, he listened to the whispers of secrets and pursued the possibility of shaping their resonances.

If we accept that photography does not, or cannot *represent* the world we gain a productive sense of the innate elusiveness of the medium. Kaja Silverman has argued that photography discloses "the world," not creates it.<sup>4</sup> Photography is comparable to its subject but not continuous with it. The medium, in other words, cannot function to definitively shape understanding but in Silverman's thesis is *analogical*. In this regard the photograph is freed, so to speak from our expectation to "explain" what it depicts and instead we begin to acknowledge photography's particular willingness to slowly apprehend rather than impose. Here we might quickly insist on the limitations of many extant characterizations of photography: absence, memory and objectification.

It is impossible to talk of Comas's photographs as *capturing* anything because what we see is seemingly in movement and intangible and also deeply associative. Splintered frames, slippages between actual things and their reflection and star-like blinks, and all amidst an inky black ground that both softens and threatens to creepily dissolve the mise-en-scene.

However, as we noted above, *SIX* possesses a seeming aim towards formal perfection. Whether an architect's or astrologer's eye is at work, the series captivates with its own pictorial logic that might seek to claim the finite. And as we also noted, Comas's seductiveness carries an implication of the pernicious, a seductiveness that perhaps glosses the possibilities of multiple

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<sup>3</sup> Marc Augé *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London: Verso, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Kaja Silverman *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1*, California: Stanford University Press, 2015.

interests in that very deception of logic and the finite. The series remains ambiguous in this respect. Whether Comas curiously stages or coolly solicits our engagement is an open question, in this respect. To be transfixed or arrested is to be faced with inevitable loss: the deathly aura of abstraction, following Judith Brown's remarkable study of the cold aesthetics of glamour in all its black and white and shimmering glories, is in the loss of the "thing" itself 'curling away from earthly concerns.'<sup>5</sup> To foreground artifice, as Baudrillard's thesis on seduction also tells us and *SIX*'s rhetoric can suggest, is to experience at the limits of experience: ambiguity, mediation, distance and impenetrability. But this is surely what photography "does" most profoundly, and Comas seems to want to tell us so. More and less.

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Brown *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009, p. 5.