



*Waiting for the Light:*  
*Michel Varisco's "Cotton Mill Series"*

The rejected objects of our world have something to say to us, but we seldom hear them. In fact, we'd do most anything not to listen: paint them, Teflon them, compact or bag them. Out of sight, out of mind. Shed of their functionality, what good are they? So we destroy them or sometimes, when we're feeling cultured, spread on a decorative glaze and pop them into the art toaster. To the objects themselves, abandoned, buried, whether we hear them or not doesn't matter. They speak their language, and we, unaware, stumble through ours.

For me, the photographs of Michel Varisco's "Cotton Mill Series" (1998) abide in the liminal zone where the receptive eye can "hear" the objects: undecodeable murmurs, perhaps, tracings, shiftings, whatever it is we pick up in the last light. In "Lightbulb," for example, dark volumes shade into the highly contrasted center plane, as well as into the borders of the frame. Every particle of dark and light is in transition, on the threshold between the representational and the abstract. The bulb's filament is alive, but in what world—the old cotton mill, then or now? Energized by the loss of function (and the absence of human figures), the objects shimmer, dislodge themselves from the representational. In the photograph's lower right, where black bleeds into gray, threads of dark and light rise like solar prominences photographed in the violet light of the calcium K line. Almost, we might say, like decalcomania, but without the surrealist's direct application of chance; instead, something transformative in the object itself and its

surrounds—the air, the dispersion of light.

Shot on infrared film for its heat sensitivity, Varisco's photographs, not unlike those of Wright Morris, take as their subject our culture's "transient ruins" (Morris, 17). But though she is equally "aroused" by the "worn and abandoned" (Morris, 18) her images are not Morris's stately, stark icons that register, in man's absence, his presence. Instead, the objects in the "Cotton Mill Series" seem disconnected from their man-made intent, severed from their history.

Closer then in spirit to the transformative films of the Brothers Quay, in particular their great "translation" of Bruno Schulz's "The Street of Crocodiles," wherein the objects in the backroom of a central European tailor shop, like Varisco's objects in the cotton mill, "exude an air of strange and frightening neglect" (Schulz, 112).

Neglect, certainly, frees the object from its representational restraints. In "Vat" the crumbling cotton mill shifts into a foregrounded vertical gray line upon a curvilinear expanse from which branch the diagonals of a receding plane. The darkness at the top of the frame (the vat's lid), directed by its own dark diagonal, tilts left. In the dynamic the image creates by contrasting shadow and light, diagonal lines and verticals, the curvilinear and the straight, our eyes can sidestep the representational to gaze instead upon the volatile abstract.

Varisco's "Cotton Mill Series" preserves that moment when our eyes have turned away, and only the photographer and her camera are there to capture the transformation.

— Tom Whalen

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