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Eileen Cowin: A Culture of Anxiety

by Jody Zellen



Eileen Cowin was preparing for her May exhibition at as-is.la which has been postponed due to Covid-19. In many ways, the work for that show encapsulates our global uncertainty and the new fear that this pandemic has unleashed. We are all very much like Cowin's "*Deer in headlights*" — innocents caught by surprise and immobilized, not sure whether to move forward or to stay put. In Cowin's image, a young deer stares out at the viewer; completely out of place in a back alley, removed somehow from its natural habitat.



Cowin is a master at weaving narratives from disparate elements. She is a voracious reader of dystopian novels and often begins with a story, transforming the nuances of those written words into carefully composed images and videos that shed light on unseen aspects of the authors prose, as filtered through Cowin's world view. Two short video diptychs, *The Pedestrian* and *Insomnia* present an aura of loneliness and unsettlement. *The Pedestrian* is a two-channel video that uses Ray Bradbury's short story as a point of departure. In Cowin's footage, she narrates a lone man's desire to walk, filming him as he ambles at dusk, through eerily silent and vacant spaces. He imagines the conversations and goes on in homes as he

passes them, unable to cross the physical and emotion barriers between outside and in. His aimless wanderings feel melancholic, familiar and relevant.



*Insomnia* begins with imagery of wolves charging through the landscape, then shifts to interior scenes, each focusing on an isolated individual suffering from sleeplessness and the different ways they cope with their insomnia. Filmed in subtle and disquieting light, the narratives present the idiosyncratic struggles and frustrations of not being able to achieve peaceful slumber. As the camera oscillates between close-ups, details and medium- ranged shots, the light shifts from night to dawn, suggesting the disruption of time that affects the insomniac.



Though created before Covid-19, the multi-panel photographic strip *Now You know* speaks to the longing and isolation that currently pervades. The elegantly photographed and beautifully lit sequence begins with a close-up of the side of a man's face, shot from behind, focusing on the graceful curve of his neck. We ask: *Who is this figure— the one with three perfectly pressed white dress shirts hanging in his closet, who is perhaps in agony, alone in an apartment with evenly spaced windows and air conditioners and a brick facade.* This is a narrative of stasis, until uncertainty sets in— unknown markings on a cinderblock wall in a dimly lit gated interior. What lurks beyond? Is it inviting or menacing? Cowin shifts the sequence to images of nature: trails damaged by heat and drought, and the entanglement of branches offers little solace. The final photograph closely crops the hidden eyes of a man adjusting his gas mask and poses the questions we all now face: *Is it safe to venture out? Will this protection work?* Cowin's haunting sequence elegantly presents the inner turmoil of the present.

Whether working on an intimate or architectural scale, Cowin's images get under the skin and unnerve. They are precisely visualized narratives that reflect the current political and social climate, exploring as Cowin remarks, a "culture of anxiety."

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