

Sure Signs Catalogue Essay

In a world of constant change, humanity faces an uncertain future. How will we conduct ourselves when disaster strikes? Where do we feel safe and how do we find refuge? Joan Kaufman's latest black and white photographic series entitled, *Sure Sign*, explores the human struggle to survive in a difficult situation where the outcome is unknown. Photographing on location and in studio, these images are set in the ancient Roman baths of Bath, England. Through seamless digital enhancement and manipulation Kaufman constructs an environment of uncertainty in a setting that has remained unchanged for thousands of years. Dark water has 'flooded' the baths creating a reflective stage upon which the players hold themselves up on primitive survival devices. It is an alternate universe where circumstances cause the population to oscillate between feelings and actions defined by hope and despair.

The biblical implications of a flood generally refer to punishment from God, followed by cleansing and renewal; an opportunity for humanity to start over again. As *Sure Sign, Series 2/#1* reveals, the flood in this case has entered Roman baths, a space historically associated with cleansing, healing, and restoration. Kaufman's figures find themselves where metaphor meets history. They must choose to accept the water as an obstacle to overcome, or an ominous symbol of their mortality. This dramatic scenario plays out amid strong vertical and horizontal planes and bold, high contrast lighting. The resulting theatricality recalls art from the Italian Baroque. However, unlike the decisive heroes painted by Caravaggio, Kaufman's figures seem unsure and tentative. There exists a dichotomy in her images that often straddles sad tragedy and heroic absurdity.

The young woman in *Sure Sign, Series 3/#1* expresses this duality. She is perched high on a bed-like structure cobbled together with a bed frame, four crutches, and medical tape. Leaning forward, she examines the dark water below and contemplates her fate. Like many figures in the *Sure Sign* series, she is dressed in what looks like a hospital gown and cap. Seated in the upper-middle of the composition, she is isolated in a column of light that runs vertically through the picture, pooling on top of the dark water below. Traditionally in art history, a beam of light placed over a central figure suggests a heavenly event or divine intervention. This figure however, peers pensively below her, rather than at the heavens above. Is she a beacon representing hope to others around her? Or is she hopeless, viewing the dark water as the only way to a new life?

The precarious balance between hope and despair is a theme repeated throughout the *Sure Sign* series. Glowing figures emerge out of the murky darkness as symbols of the human condition in states of uncertainty. Some appear resourceful, as in *Sure Sign, Series 3/#3*, where we observe a female figure on oversized crutches, or stilts. Holding herself up and on this apparatus, she glances casually beyond the picture frame. Although she possesses the means for survival, she appears child-like and timid, unsure of how to save herself. In *Sure Sign, Series 1/#1* the subject fills the picture frame, lying in a fetal position with her back to the viewer. Her curved form would appear pitiful and hopeless, but for the soft beam of light falling over her body and the firm bed frame holding her above water. Others still, as in *Sure Sign, Series 4/#1 and #2*, show strength and determination. These vertical compositions allow the viewer to look into the scenes from above, where a figure climbs a ladder out of the floodwaters. The light source seeps in from behind the figures in both photographs distorting their bodies and creating a sense of

weightlessness. It is unclear if these figures have overcome the flood or rest below the water, clinging to their failed modes of escape.

Sure Sign, Series 6/#2, offers a look at Kaufman's 'stage' emptied of figures. Grand architecture, abandoned bed frames, and deep water dimpled by raindrops remain as evidence. The vacant space is a sure sign the uncertainty continues.

Carol-Ann Ryan, 2006

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