

The creep-tastic world of haunted houses inspires new photo exhibition in Fort Worth

Misty Keasler: Haunt - September 23 - November 26, 2017 at The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

By Lauren Smart | Special Contributor - Sep 20, 2017



Misty Keasler Trophy Room, Bates Motel, Glen Mills, PA, 2016 Archival pigment print

Can a photograph be scary? Better yet, what makes anything scary? And why are so many Americans chasing a good scare? Traces of these questions materialize in Dallas-based artist Misty Keasler's "Haunt," a photographic exhibition that starts Saturday at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

For the past two years, Keasler explored the nooks and crannies of 13 commercial haunted houses throughout the country on days when they are devoid of monsters or visitors. In hundreds of resulting photographs, which will be published in a book by Archon Projects, she reveals the obsessively detailed,

calculatedly spooky spaces created to accommodate nighttime visitors seeking adventure somewhere between the playfully frightening and bone chilling.



Blackthorne Manor, *Terror on the Fox*, Green Bay, WI, 2016 archival pigment print

It's the elaborate artifice more than the haunts themselves that interests Keasler, whose work regularly oscillates from harsh realities to fabricated realities. She calls herself a "bifurcated artist." In her work as a photojournalist, she has covered human trafficking, drug addiction and communities living on the edge of garbage dumps. But she's probably most well-known for her work documenting Japan's fantastical love hotels.

"I've always been interested in spaces that purport to be something that they're not. These haunted houses do that," Keasler said. "Many of them are in warehouse spaces, but you end up walking through an entire house that was built from the ground up completely out of someone's imagination."

Keasler's interest in haunted houses didn't begin until adulthood when she started dating her now-husband Brian Gibb. On a visit to Thrillvania in Terrell, interest morphed into obsession. In spite of the house's design to scare visitors forward, Keasler found herself lingering to peer into corners and gaze up at the ceilings.



Electroshock Therapy, Pennhurst Asylum, Spring City, PA, 2016, Archival pigment print

One of the four houses on the Thrillvania property became the inspiration for the entire Haunt project. The Verdun Manor was built by Disney Imagineers, a division of the Walt Disney Corporation, in the 1960s as one of a handful of houses when the company experimented with the business of haunts. To gain access to the property, Keasler pitched a photo spread to D Magazine for its October 2015 issue. Then, she had to master the art of a scary photograph.

"It's a real challenge photographically to make images that are scary and reflective of those spaces, which are tapping into all of your senses when you're there," Keasler said. "Sometimes a room or an image of the room when something is off is much scarier than the monster that scared you when you walked into the room."

Some of the spaces she was working in were so dark her light meter wouldn't even give a reading. She experimented with exposure; several photographs took nearly an hour to capture. Post-production also played a role in granting the images a more genuine transference of the spooky experience.

"I wasn't so concerned with truthiness," Keasler said. "I was relying on my memory of what it was like to be in that space as opposed to the artifact or the factual recording on the film."

As for the portraits of the actors, 15 of which appear in the exhibition, she credits the grim faces of early photography as inspiration. She wanted to stay away from the posed promotional imagery, instead treating the characters with the same level of seriousness with which she treated the spaces. At the Modern, these goblins and ghouls will be presented in ornate frames to resemble a portrait gallery.

"The actors take their work very seriously," Keasler said. "Some of my first photos of these characters were hokey or cheesy, but when you're at these haunts, they inspire real fear."

This contrast between the extreme artifice of the spaces and the real fear of the experience is what makes haunted houses such interesting cultural artifacts for Keasler. There's something primal about this pursuit of a good scare and something privileged, as well.

"This only happens in peaceful places, and it only works if you know you're actually safe," Keasler said. "If your life is scary on a regular basis, you don't willingly let a man start up a chainsaw and chase you through a house."

Backstory: Texas has a new art book publisher, Archon Projects

The timing was too perfect for Brian Gibb to resist. Gibb, a graphic design wizard and the owner of Design District gallery the Public Trust, launches his new art book publishing company, Archon Projects, on the heels of Misty Keasler's exhibition, "Haunt," at the Modern. The collection of Keasler's haunted house photographs will include an essay by Margee Kerr, a sociologist who studies fear, and effectively serves as the catalog for the exhibition.

Simultaneously, the company will release, Robyn O'Neil: Twenty Years of Drawing, a survey of her massive body of work that includes an essay by Alison de Lima Greene, the modern and contemporary curator at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

This marks Gibb's long-considered return to design and publishing after previous success with the award-winning international quarterly, Art Prostitute. He won't reveal the next artists he's working with, but his voice is giddy when he says he can't wait to share the news.

The books will sell for around \$50 at various art spaces and bookstores throughout the country. And even at a few haunted houses. You can also order online at archonprojects.com. —L.S.