

The Lovingly Crafted Horror of American Haunted Houses

Misty Keasler explored 13 haunted houses across the United States, photographing their blood-spattered interiors and dark architecture of terror.

by Allison Meier - October 27, 2017



Photographer Misty Keasler visited 13 haunted houses across the United States, exploring their architecture of horror while they were empty. Without the sound, the smells, and, of course, the spooky characters waiting to terrorize the paying guests, the photographs don't fully capture the experience of a haunted house. However, it was that limitation that drew Keasler to her subject.

"The photographs in this series are addressing the same fears that the haunts are focused on, but they operate in completely different ways," Keasler told Hyperallergic. "Single images ask that we stop, look, and contemplate. It is a very different psychology to quietly think about, say, a bed with chains and missing-children posters and all the implied horror of a character who created that space, as opposed to being inside that same environment, reacting to it on a biological level, and running away from that same character."

The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in Texas is exhibiting a series of Keasler's photographs in *Haunt*. More are published in a book of the same title, recently released by Archon Projects. Some of the Dallas-based photographer's images frame details of blood-spattered interiors, such as a grotesque assemblage of mutilated chickens hanging near a human head served in a pan. Others zoom out to take in a smoky sitting room crowded with taxidermy, or a staircase strewn with broken toys presided over by an unnerving clown. Each asks what we are afraid of, and how that fear is commodified.



Installation view of *Misty Keasler: Haunt* at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (courtesy the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth)

Top: Misty Keasler, "Black Thorne Manor, Terror on the Fox, Green Bay, WI" (2016), archival pigment print, 60 × 60 inches

"I found that the most interesting and intriguing photos were the ones that weren't focused on the spectacle of the room, but what was just outside of it," Keasler stated. "These images were often the most unsettling. There would be an implied storyline that you couldn't quite put together, but you could tell something was not right."

Keasler has previously photographed the fantasy rooms of Japanese love hotels, published in 2006 by Chronicle Books, and *Haunt* similarly considers who designed these spaces, and for whom. "My work is often focused on long looks at what most people do not or cannot normally see," she said. Whereas the love hotels featured subway cars and carousels in their romantic escapes, the haunted houses revel in electroshock labs and giant hands bursting through walls. Yet both share an attention to their intimate details, and an incredible imagination, something the patrons might only glimpse in their adrenaline-fueled rush through the darkness.

"I married someone who has gone to haunted houses every year since he was young, so when we started dating he dragged me along," Keasler explained. "I wasn't very impressed with most of the places we visited until we went to Thrillvania in Terrell, Texas, three years ago. It was so different — a completely immersive environment — and I was so interested in going back and looking at all the details that made the environment work. Most of them are lost on the viewer because you are on a forced path, and sometimes running through."

Alongside the haunted house photographs, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth is exhibiting Keasler's portraits of haunt actors, from butcher-knife-wielding murderer to crow-faced monster. The elaborate costumes and detailed environments are all intended to startle in a safe setting, and that manufactured unease, detached from the strobe lights and pounding music, still creeps through the photographs in *Haunt*.



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"Boudoir, ScareHouse, Pittsburgh, PA" (2016), archival pigment print, 30x30" and "Kitchen, Terror on the Fox, Green Bay, WI" (2016), archival pigment print, 42x42"



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Misty Keasler: Haunt

continues through November 26

at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (3200 Darnell Street, Fort Worth, Texas).