

Covering the full range of disasters—from devastating hurricanes, tornados, and fires to routine mishaps and negligence—the genre of photographic representation to which the following images belong functions as raw data for consulting companies who do building damage evaluation and cost estimation. Occasionally staggering in the magnitude of destruction shown, these images can also be deceptively serene—they are by turns explicit, abstract, readable, beautiful, and inscrutable. Always devoid of people, they feature ripped-away walls, charred tangled heaps of metal, ravaged one-arm bandits, and Jacuzzis full of Styrofoam. On the face of it entirely utilitarian, they are after-the-fact tools for assessing catastrophes and accidents and deciding what’s wrong with manmade structures and how much it will cost to put them back together. As workhorses for this profession, they fulfill their role admirably and quietly, without calling attention to themselves. But they lead a double life. When seen outside the industry, their particular look and peculiar appeal is abundantly evident, despite their entirely un-artistic origins.

These are not the pornography of photogenic ruins or abandoned factories, the stuff of coffee table books published and bought far away from those melancholy sites of desuetude. They also do not belong to the activist school of photojournalism prone to aestheticizing violence by way of claiming that explicitly depicting war and suffering elicits awareness, sympathy, and a humanitarian or military response. Both those kinds of photography have a desire to provoke an emotional reaction, be it elegiac sentimentality, shock, or empathy; the ones here also aim to “bear witness,” which they certainly do, but they are not socially conscious or about feelings. They are not for public consumption, and do not try to be appealing to the eye, yet they often are.

In laymen’s terms, these companies act as a liaison between the building owners or developers and the insurance companies. Their role is to advocate, and the field photos, which can number from the hundreds to the many thousands for a given incident depending on the scale of damage, are an attempt to bring the truth to light. The world of insurance claims offers many possible scenarios, ranging from owners grateful for assistance in getting a fair settlement to cases that go on for years and are settled in court. At the end of the day, it comes down to compensation, to what can be agreed upon as a reasonable cost to restore what was destroyed.

While the images, and the circumstances under which they were made, are often dramatic, there are plenty that are less spectacular and make you wonder what, if anything, is wrong. What appears at first glance to be a nice reflecting pool is in fact a couple of feet of standing water on a roof. Seemingly trivial, but now the edifice is in peril of collapse. To the non-specialist what is awry can be a puzzle, subtle, like a view of ostensibly peaceful and scenic South Padre Island after Hurricane Dolly. A close inspection is needed to discern the remains of fully leaved palm trees and the cabanas leaning at a fifteen-degree angle.

Some call this a “dark at heart” occupation since when disaster strikes, what might be ruinous for other businesses is a chance for this one to thrive. Ambrose Bierce’s observation that there are two kinds of calamities—“misfortunes to us, and good fortune to others”—describes this attitude, though to be fair in a complicated world there is another side to the coin along the lines of Seneca’s “calamity is virtue’s opportunity.” This ambiguous morass of cynical opportunism and equitable resolution is brought to light in these photographs, exposing the murkiness of our relationships to other people’s problems. Incredible devastation, but it didn’t happen to me. How horrible, how sad, how can I help? Or just more noise in the onslaught of incomprehensible misery?

Between acts of God and personal idiocy, they cover a lot of ground, provoking emotions from pity to disbelief to mirth. It’s hard not to laugh at the sight of a field of dead stuffed animals outside a storage facility at Six Flags. Pressed to the top of the building as the water rose, the creatures oozed or shot out when the roof finally popped off. Funny. But in all these cases, the flip side is that someone has probably lost several million dollars. He or she is not finding it amusing, and it’s definitely not humorous when someone has died, or lost their home or livelihood. Without an obvious ethical stance, these documents of ruination are morally and philosophically contradictory, imprecise, and ambivalent; mute reports of obliteration that don’t presume to tell you how to feel. But upon encountering them, one can’t help but have intimations of the vast scope of tragedy and comedy that is life, not to mention finding confirmation that it is, as ever, just one damn thing after another.

*The author wishes to thank Dennis Di Millo, David Belt, and Tsatsral Raeuber for their kind assistance in preparing this article, and the employees of DBI who took these pictures.*



New Orleans, Louisiana, 2005.



Houston, Texas, 2004.



Biloxi, Mississippi, 2005.



Houston, Texas, 2009.