

Introduction to the catalogue “Reversed Cities M6J 1H9”, published in June 2005, on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition at Spin Gallery, Toronto.

## **Bright Lights, Backwards City: Francesco Pignatelli’s X-Ray Gaze**

**RM Vaughan**

*This city settles and shifts on an infrastructure of graffiti, carports, the garish murals sucking on the underbellies of bridges. This city is a stuttering story punctuated by hotel gargoyles and stop signs and the gaping O of the burned out cathedral. It holds you in its grey asphalt arms as you stumble home from the all night café, over the bridges with railings like shattered teeth.*

Chandra Mayor *Cherry*

A city is always a spectacle. Even the dullest corners of the most tired cities pulse with submerged life, with buried support systems, overlooked histories, wires and water pipes and bone fragments, with unacknowledged life. Francesco Pignatelli’s reversed cities, images taken in opposition to our unreliable senses, ask us to affirm these hidden stories and show us the warmth that waits, like the sun behind clouds, underneath the most muddied bricks and sooty windows. Pignatelli is not a photographer – he’s an archaeologist hunting for light.

It is easy to see a city for what it (supposedly) is – a cluttered place, crammed with busy people and busier architecture, a place of tunnels and hovels and locked doors. It is easy to dismiss a city as cold and lifeless, as a place where lives and energies connect only by random accident or by stealth. But Pignatelli knows better. He sees, literally, between the cracks, finds the ghosts in the machines and welcomes them like old friends. Pignatelli’s photographs feed on the particles of energy, the traces and narrow beams of shared joy and shared sorrow, that pass unnoticed between each city dweller.

If Pignatelli’s buildings and streetscapes look like landscapes on fire, it’s because he understands that heat moves invisibly between structures and lives, that there is not always smoke where there is fire and that within every cold office tower or bolted shut shop front lingers the dreams, frustrations and passions of the people who make the buildings work, come alive. Pignatelli traces our energies as effectively as a sniper armed with infrared vision.

We must thank Pignatelli for visiting places we have all seen, at least on television – London, Tokyo, Berlin (and soon Toronto) – and not succumbing to

tourist trap visions. There are no radiating Eiffel Towers here, no Big Bens dappled with ghostly vapours or Brandenburg Gates pulsing with laser gun yellows, no world landmarks captured in holographic blues, like pickled souvenirs.

Rather, Pignatelli wanders the back streets, looking for dividing walls and locked doors, run down shopping districts, pedestrian intersections and poster-splattered hoardings – places that speak of everyday human transaction, of the possibility of connection, accidental sharing. His photographs of barriers and dead ends, of nullifying architectures that stand as notifications of difference – class, race, economics, quality of life – are infused with an eerie, otherworldly glow, as if they too, despite their nominal role as dividing lines and sectarian enforcers, crave human intervention, want to be overpowered and disrupted, perhaps torn down.

Pignatelli's stark, acid washed blue and green moonscape colours are not signifiers of further otherness, not invisible fogs of alienation captured, like rare wildlife, by a patient investigator. No, what these inhuman colours signify is *desire*, the need to be fulfilled by contact and exchange. Pignatelli is not merely chronicling the apartness or malaise city living sometimes generates – he's marking loneliness in lonely colours, found in lonely places. He's singing, in inks and saturated chemicals, the blues.

Occasionally, people cross Pignatelli's photographic path. We see these accidental models the same way we half-see billboards or passing traffic – as visual information, not living, breathing fellow travellers. Pignatelli infuses his passers-by with haunting (and haunted) negative shades. An arm reaches out, etched in cobalt blue. A head turns – perhaps in recognition? – and is a swirl of burnt whites and sulphuric browns. Pignatelli's phantom people are the most contradictory elements in his work – because he does not seek to make them any less a part of the vacant terrain, does not try to warm up his images of longing and disassociation with forgiving, humanized treatments of the actual people who inhabit such spaces.

In order for Pignatelli's vision of the city as an alternately hostile yet needy place to be fully realized, he must render his fleeting glimpses of a city's populations with the same contradictory mix of life and lifelessness, of movement and energy captured in the colours of rigour mortis.

People, Pignatelli shows us, are another form of advertising – and thus reach out to us as they simultaneously recognize and admit (by their very movements and boldness, by the inherent desperation in the hot colours Pignatelli chooses for them) the obvious futility of the siren call. No wonder Pignatelli's photographs often treat billboards as if they were ripe and worthy subjects for portraiture and appear to dismiss living people as mere ad copy, signage and excess information. If, after all, the (allegedly) inanimate buildings, the cold stones and colder steel, harbour a residual emotional warmth that is both covetous and memorial, how can living people escape this duality, this approach-retreat syndrome?

They can't, of course - so Pignatelli photographs people as if they were sea creatures, the kind found so deep beneath the reach of the sun that they must manufacture their own light, a protein and protean fluorescence.

I hesitate to describe these photographs as mixed messages ... but urban life is itself a mixed message. Any of us can be made aware, by the simplest accident or sudden interruption, of the threads of energy - emotional, sexual, what have you - that connect vast numbers of people crammed into very small spaces. And, with Pignatelli's luminous photographs, we can see this camouflaged (sublimated?) energy made visible. But for every revelation, every admission of need, comes a counter claim, a defensive reaction, a refusal to see, admit the obvious.

Pignatelli's startling urban negatives play with, indeed tease and cajole, this dynamic, the universal urban feeling of estrangement and relation, with a vividness previously found only in dreams or polarized corneas, eyes shut by flashbulbs, headlights and blinking neon.