

FrameWork 9/13

Sabrina Maher on Kevin Yates

No one thought it was going to be that bad.

Blame could be pointed in numerous directions. State and national officials were late in calling for the evacuation of New Orleans. Once the evacuation call was sounded, not enough residents followed orders. Others simply did not have the means to leave. Living on the Gulf, many had become immune to the threats of tropical storms and hurricanes. They reasoned that they managed last time, and the time before that one, as well as back in 1992 with Andrew. Those who were old enough remembered Camille. They survived in 1969.

There were levees protecting the city.

The levees on the Industrial Canal failed under the combination of strong winds, heavy rainfall and storm surges. The flood walls and levee broke and storm surges of 30 feet poured over the city.

Katrina was deceiving. She tricked everyone. Originating in the waters off the Bahamas, the tropical storm developed into a Category 1 hurricane by the time it hit Florida. She lost intensity as she moved across the state, until hitting the Gulf of Mexico she was re-invigorated by the warm waters.

She became the deadliest hurricane to strike the U.S. in over a hundred years.

It's estimated that 80 percent of New Orleans was submerged under floodwater after Katrina hit in 2005. Transformed into a buried city, with flooding measured up to 20 feet in some places, it took weeks for the water to recede. Hundreds were missing, thousands dead and hundreds of thousands of homeless and displaced. There was no electricity. No drinking water. No food. Hospitals were crippled. Violence, looting and crime overtook the ravaged city. There simply was not enough help. No hope. Nothing but the ruins and their reflections in the water.¹



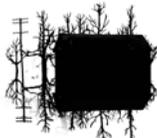
Kevin Yates' exhibition *Usher the Fall of the House* takes its titular inspiration from an Edgar Allan Poe story. In Poe's story *The Fall of the House of Usher* an anonymous narrator recounts his journey to visit his childhood friend, Roderick Usher, whom he finds ill and tormented by some unnamed mental affliction. Suffering away in his family home, a spooky and forbidden estate surrounded by a macabre lake, Usher spends his days racked with fear and anxiety about his imminent doom. During the narrator's troubling stay at the House of Usher, he bears witness to increasingly disturbing events culminating in the mistaken entombment of Usher's sister and her ghostly rising from the grave to collect her brother.

Poe was a master of Gothic literature, employing the literary trope of the Doppelgänger to construct his tales of terror. Allusions to the Doppelgänger are littered throughout *The Fall of the House of Usher* in the employment of doubles and inverse reflections. The appearance of the Doppelgänger represents a split in a

¹ All data and facts on Hurricane Katrina were sourced from the National Climatic Data Center (<http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/extremeevents/specialreports/Hurricane-Katrina.pdf>) and FEMA (<http://www.fema.gov/response-recovery/about-hurricane-katrina>).

subject that occurs when the defective element is separated from the original, resulting in an exact replica.² This double often signifies destructive and evil and infects the audience with a sense of eeriness and fear. This feeling, which Freud called “the uncanny”, is the result of witnessing the duplication of the familiar and its resultant double existing outside the regular order of things.

Yates’ most recent works takes direct inspiration from the themes presented in Poe’s work of doubling, impending doom, claustrophobic isolation, and anxiety. Yet the artist modernizes the Gothic themes by filtering them through the events of Hurricane Katrina. When Poe’s tale of personal anxiety and individual struggle with death becomes refracted through the lens of Hurricane Katrina, the works that are the outcome help amplify the author’s themes and make them relevant across a contemporary social context.



Yates’ first personal encounter with the effects of Katrina occurred in 2005 while teaching at the University of Oregon in Eugene. Like most people, he had watched the events unfold on television and in the media. The feeling of horror caused by the tragic events was eclipsed only by the anger and frustration at the inaction and apathy of the government in dealing with the hurricane’s aftermath. Katrina faded into the background, with the plight of the residents of Louisiana and Alabama being eclipsed by George W. Bush’s “War on Terror”. While teaching, Yates began meeting students from New Orleans who encountered problems with enrolment due to their relocation without access to records. Spurred by his interactions with these students, Yates travelled to Louisiana and started collecting materials that would eventually inspire the works in *Usher the Fall of the House*.

Usher the Fall of the House, a striking sculptural object that shares its name with the title of the exhibition, is remarkable for its ability to impose a sense of anxiety and trepidation in the viewer. Two wooden chests of drawers – one found, the other sculpted by Yates to be its exact replica – are flipped vertically, sandwiching a small glass aquarium that encloses a bronze sculpture. The size and weight of the wooden pieces seem set to crush the delicate glass at any moment. The viewer watches with a sense of unease, waiting for the fine balance to be tipped and the structure to implode. The threat of imminent collapse is heightened by the nature of the enclosed bronze sculpture. Hermetically sealed and oppressively contained, it depicts a skeleton reclining on a rock formation with a plant growing at its feet. Once again, a double is presented with the exact copy of the bronze sculpture looming overhead. Yates alludes to water and its reflective nature in multiple ways: the aquarium structure, the inclusion of colourful pebbles used to line fish tanks, and the addition of an etched line running along the middle of the glass structure referencing the water’s surface. Suddenly, the skeleton and its Doppelgänger can be understood as entombed within a watery grave, at once silent and somber while simultaneously echoing the memory of Poe’s tale and the deadly outcome of Katrina.



² Dimitris Vardoulakis, “The Return of Negation: The Doppelgänger in Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’,” *SubStance* 35, no. 2, issue 110: Nothing (2006): 100.

In 2010, Yates made the first of what would be two trips to Louisiana to document the aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina. During this inaugural visit, Yates' focus was on the domestic buildings of the area; vacated homes, emptied of human inhabitation due to the severity of the damage inflicted by the storm. It was from this material that several of the pieces from the exhibition found their inspiration.

Displayed on the same wall, *9th Street*, *Camp Street* and *Chestnut Street* present as an eerie alliteration of domestic culture. The model homes are quintessentially suburban yet communicate a sense of the uncanny in their duplicity. The artist chose the models based on their utter ordinariness to create a sense of familiarity that would resonate with his audience. While the homes could be from anywhere in North America, the titles refer to streets in New Orleans. Suddenly the models become more sinister, as their doubling can be seen as representing watery reflections in floodwater, their innate stillness as signs of abandonment and vacancy.

With *Waterline*, Yates, working in collaboration with his brother, experimental filmmaker Robert Yates, moves his lens to the interior of the abandoned homes. The video work presents the interior of a flood-ravaged house culled during their visit to New Orleans in 2010. The frame depicts the kitchen of a home obviously abandoned: walls with peeling paint, cabinets thrown open to show bare shelves and water damage, ceiling buckling and collapsing with the guts of the house spilling forth. Though a still shot, a feeling of claustrophobic oppression is intimated by inversely doubling the scene and having the twinned images rise and sink from an implied water line. The effect places the viewer in a setting that mimics the swelling and receding movement of water. The oppressive scene is heightened by the eeriness of the contradiction between the interior tableaux with the snapshot of the exterior visible in the rear: sun-drenched, abundantly foliated, green and alive.

Yates returned to New Orleans in the spring of 2013 to study historical wallpaper patterns and the migratory habits of birds inhabiting in Grand Isle, Louisiana. This seemingly incongruous research is merged in another film project created in collaboration with Robert Yates. Filmed footage of the birds, sweetly chirping and lightly skittering, is overlaid on fragments of damask wallpaper decorated with arabesque leaves. Mirrored across the patterned backdrop, the dancing birds have a hypnotizing effect that would be calming if not for their uncanny resemblance to black blinking eyes. Similar to the other works in *Usher the Fall of the House*, the act of doubling brings out the sinister in the ordinary.

Yates' art harnesses Poe's literary mechanism of the Doppelgänger to help make visible the traumas of Hurricane Katrina. The devastating loss of life and property inflicted by the storm was shouldered primarily by the poor and marginalized communities of the region, further handicapping those already at a disadvantage. It was the low-income survivors who to this day continue to try and cope with the long-term effects of Katrina; these communities saw the rates of serious mental illness, PTSD and suicide rise to staggering levels.³In this way the works in *Usher the Fall of the House* collectively act as a pointed social commentary of the social and economic tragedy that befell the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Yet they also act as an intimate and personal reflection of inner anxiety and individual fear, pushing the viewers to confront themselves by asking what they see in the reflections.

³ For more information mental and physical health problems in low-income Hurricane Katrina survivors please see: National Institute of Health study (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3276074/>) and the World Health Organization bulletin (<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/84/12/06-033019ab/en/>).