

CURTAIN

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Jeff Bierk
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Curated by Matthew Ryan Smith

November 12, 2016
- January 8, 2017

Opening Reception & Artist Talk
Sunday November 13, 2-4 pm

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Photography gave me a sentiment as certain as remembrance.

- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*ⁱ



The exhibition “CURTAIN” features Toronto-based artist and photographer Jeff Bierk. Well-known for turning his camera towards his friends and others, Bierk has chosen to reverse his gaze and reflect upon his life, questioning the poetics of memory and how it can generate meaning from past events and experiences. In the exhibition, he pairs a hitherto unseen series of photographs taken in hospitals between 2009 and 2010 with current photo-based portraiture, posing a layering of memory that is at once beautiful and distorted.

Many of the photographs are of standard-issue hospital curtains, but what lies behind the curtain is a story of profound loss and subsequent steps toward renewal. Bierk first became intimately acquainted with hospital curtains as a young adult when both of his parents were hospitalized with cancer; later dying of the illness within four years of each other. Following these difficult events, he began shooting photographs of curtains during his then-partner’s illness as a means of coping with the traumas he long-associated with the hospital space. In this body of work, viewers encounter large, pale-coloured cloths that hang lazily to the floor and are lit from behind by seemingly divine fluorescent light.

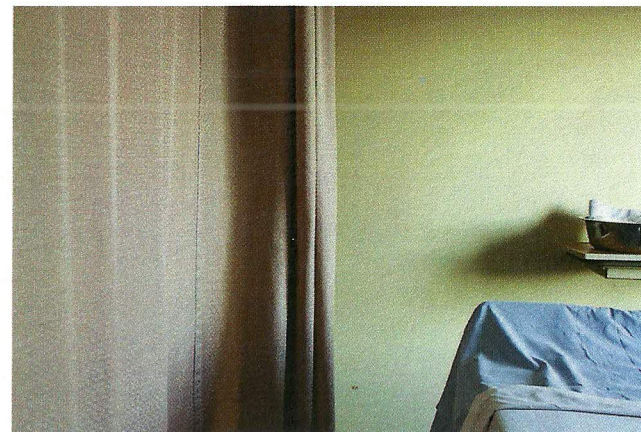
For Bierk, the hospital curtain represents the end of life, the final “curtain call” so to speak. In returning to these objects as only the living can, by seeing them as both photographs and reality, he finds a new possibility for exchange with the departed. In the absence of the opportunity for actual conversation with his late father David, the seminal Peterborough-based painter recognized for appropriated Old Master works, Bierk recalls

finding an aesthetic dialogue with his father in the folds; in the idea that the drapery’s deep contrasts and subtle intonations of colour present something painterly and reminiscent of his father’s works. As such, the curtains offer homage to the aesthetic sensibilities shared amongst the Bierk family, specifically between David Bierk and his son.

In later years, the same curtains that once brought about painful memories of sickness and death have become re-contextualized as a motif in the lives of those that continue to be documented by Bierk in his ongoing series of portraits; namely, his friends and close collaborators James and Donny Evans. These are photographs replete with new friendships and witness to the suffering that comes with it. Ultimately, in “CURTAIN,” Bierk gives special attention to the ways that emotional grief can evolve and transform over time.

Though the curtains serve as a dividing screen or barrier between the public and the private spheres of the hospital ward, Bierk’s images invite us to project our own most private experiences with illness and hospitalization. Seen in this way, they are strongly relational and create a matrix of exchange and reciprocity between viewers and the artwork, even between viewers and the artist. While Bierk’s photographs allow viewers to “feel for” others, to practice empathy as a way of seeing,ⁱⁱ they also offer an important opportunity to work through personal loss and the process of mourning. These are social images.

- Matthew Ryan Smith



ⁱ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 70.

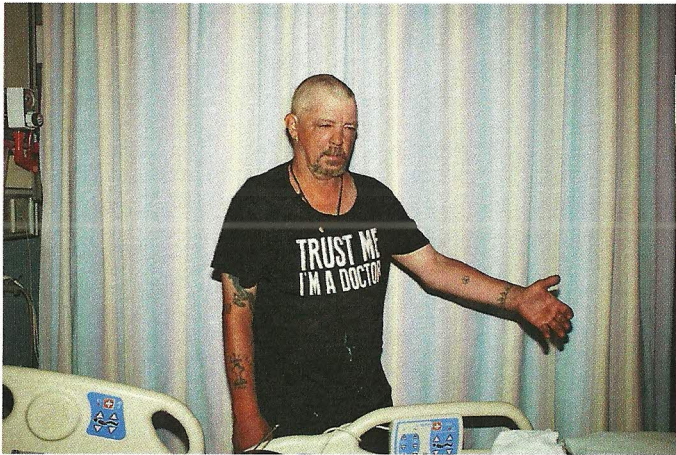
ⁱⁱ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10.



Jeff Bierk is a self-taught Toronto-based artist and photographer whose work has appeared in several national and international exhibitions and art publications.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Jimmy Evans is one of the closest collaborators. His brother Donny was a big part of our community in Toronto. Donny stopped coming around for a while, and one day Jimmy told me that Donny was dying in the hospital. He was one of the first people in that circle of friends to fall sharply to disease while the rest of the group was living fearlessly and doing whatever they wanted to their bodies. One summer's day Jimmy and our friend Brent showed up to my house to go see Donny. We rode the subway and walked to the hospital. We left Brent outside to pass out on the grass. Jimmy and I went up the elevator. I remember it was very scary - hospitals never lose their effect on me - I'm afraid of them. They put me on edge with all they bring back. To see Donny so frail and dying in a hospital bed was just very overwhelming. I had never seen Jimmy cry. He took his hat off. It was a very quiet moment.



Jimmy had asked me to take photographs of Donny. There was this pale palette, partly from this curtain, that divided Donny from the hospital and his roommate. The light was incredible, playing with the walls and the folds. I just remember seeing that image and being enchanted by this intense beauty. Seeing Jimmy with this light, Donny's hollowed cheeks, and being overwhelmed by the sadness of that situation, I recalled all the times before in hospitals, with death. All of a sudden I was in so many places at

once, and I realized how many moments the one image contained. Taking the photograph served as a brief escape from those feelings. Now, when I look at it, the photograph has become an expression of that moment, a placeholder for all these fluid layers of feeling and memory, an object always in the process of becoming, with which my relationship is ever changing.



When I show a photo of a photo, (like a re-photographed photo of Donny), or these old photos of curtains now positioned across from a new one of Jimmy, I'm speaking to the way the visual - motif, photograph, body - carries memory and serves as an entryway into another time. I'm going to do a similar thing right here with writing and have my artist statement from 2011 enter this artist statement from 2016:

CURTAIN is a series that began as an instinctual reaction, an examination of my surroundings at a time of fear and uncertainty in a space that still evokes difficult memories. To complete the series I revisited hospitals in an attempt to further understand death and loss, using the curtains as both a catalyst and metaphor. While they act as representations of death, loss and the trauma inside hospitals, I have found them to be sublimely beautiful outside their original context. These seemingly lifeless, inanimate folds of fabric say much more to me. They embody the personal loss I have experienced and my incessant desire to search for the beauty in the realities of life. - 2011

LIST OF WORKS

Donny, Silk #1, 2013 - 2015

14" x 9 1/2", c-print

Donny, Silk #2, 2013 - 2015

14" x 9 1/2", c-print

Jimmy (Curtain), Visiting Donny, June 22, 2015

projection

2002 - 2016

video

Album, 1982 - 2016

Jeff Bierk & James Evans

2010 - 2016 (#1 - 5)

cyanotype

Curtain #1, December 1, 2009

27" x 40", c-print

Curtain #4, March 24, 2010

27" x 40", c-print

Curtain #7, October 18, 2010

27" x 40", c-print

Curtain #8, October 25, 2010

27" x 40", c-print

Curtain #9, October 18, 2010

27" x 40", c-print

Curtain #12, October 25, 2010

27" x 40", c-print

Curtain #13, October 18, 2010

27" x 40", c-print

Curtain #14, October 18, 2010

27" x 40", c-print

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