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Art & Photography

Lensing the darkly surreal spectacle of Florida's Palm Beach

Rachel Louise Brown's series "Simulations" explores the strange tension between reality and fantasy in the American hotspot known for Disney World

16 May, 2019



The Mermaid Weeki Wachee Springs, 2017.

At one point during her residency at Palm Beach Photographic Centre, British photographer [Rachel Louise Brown](#) drove across the state of Florida to attend an 80-year old mermaid show at Weeki Wachee Springs — a state park situated around a large cavernous spring that proudly calls itself one of “Florida’s oldest roadside attractions — entertaining audiences since 1947!” If the park’s main draw — a subterranean auditorium, where onlookers can watch ‘mermaids’ swim and perform underwater — wasn’t strange enough, at the time that Brown visited, a serial killer was living within a 7-mile radius, preying on solitary women. On top of that, there was a lighting strike, preventing the ‘mermaids’ from performing. “I sort of felt really on edge most of the time I was there,” Brown says.

The resulting photographic series [Simulations](#) (2014-18), which is on display at [Photo London](#) this week, presented by [Sea Containers London](#) and curated by [Maggie O’Regan](#), investigates this strange pairing of escapist wonder and sinister tension that Brown found inherent in Florida’s fabric. Made over four years, *Simulations* emerged from Brown’s initial fascination with Florida as a destination linked with fantasy, distraction, and thrill seeking on account of theme parks such as Disney World and Universal Studios. Brown, who is currently photo editor at Harper’s Bazaar UK, considers Florida to be a “place of performance” — so she wanted to explore the constructed fictions of the popular vacation spot.



Dancer, Scores Gentlemen's Club, West Palm Beach, 2017.



Marching Band II, West Palm Beach, 2017.

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Central to Brown's thinking, was the essay "Simulacra and Simulations" by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, where he puts forward a theory on 'hyperreality' — when it becomes impossible to distinguish between what's real from what's imaginary. In his writing on the subject, Baudrillard says that Disneyland, and places like it, are "imaginary stations" — "a play of illusions and phantasms" that are built to distract us from the fakeness of our everyday realities.

Across the series, this instability between fantasy and reality is paramount. Based predominantly on the elite island resort of Palm Beach — whose name as Brown points out is often found splashed across high street t-shirts — the Royal College of Art graduate often worked at night on a medium format camera. The result are eerie images that often exacerbate Florida's sugary facades and surreal sights: the ghostly glow of a neon laundromat sign; the uncanny form of an enormous whipped ice-cream cone; toytown buildings, or the weirdly ominous twinkle of a deserted merry-go-round. In such images, the dream-like blends seamlessly with reality, or the grey old 'real' takes on oneiric potential.



Ice Cream Stand, Stuart, 2015.

A major turning-point came about when Brown went to Weeki Wachee Springs to photograph the mermaid performers. The resulting image — a magical aquatic scene of a mermaid suspended underwater — made her realise that "it's not just about capturing a space that creates a sense of performance, or about a stranger becoming a character, but perhaps it's also about people who train to become a simulation (of reality), those who train to become a performance." Out of this realisation, a whole new aspect of the project emerged, where Brown moved her focus from nocturnal wanderings around carnivals and empty Palm Beach boulevards, to gymnasts, ballerinas, strippers, even marching bands. Unconsciously, a gendered focus surfaced: "There is a really amazing link between the mermaids, the gymnasts, the ballerinas and the stripper. They all perform this insanely learned and trained movement of the body, but it was a very different performance of femininity." She continues: "It's quite fascinating to me to see these different performances, and you kind of wonder how these women and girls went down different routes in life and what their performance means to the spectacle of being female."

But sometimes the project took Brown to darker places. In the second year of shooting *Simulations*, she started to conduct call-outs and to place ads for potential models in local newspapers. One person, who she met in parking lot, for example, had "an *American Psycho* vibe — I was afraid." Such an experience was illustrative of the project as a whole, the sense of suspense in working in a location that exists so precariously between fact and fiction as Florida does. "There's a fantastic sense of spectacle to the place, but there's also a tension and a shock factor to it," explains Brown. "It felt like there was something bubbling under the surface that was a bit odd, something that was going to come out and surprise me at any point in time."

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You can see more from the series below:



Simulations is currently on view at Photo London through to 19 May at Somerset House. *Simulations* is also on view at a satellite show at *The Gallery* at Sea Containers London until 26 May.

All photos courtesy of [Rachel Louise Brown](#).

By *Kathryn O'Regan*