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Saturday, December 13th, 2014

## Mind Ride: Nathan Lyons at Bruce Silverstein

by Charles Schultz

*Nathan Lyons: Return Your Mind To Its Upright Position* at Bruce Silverstein Gallery

October 30 to December 20, 2014

535 West 24th Street #1 (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 627 3930



Nathan Lyons, *Untitled (Return Your Mind to Its Upright Position)*, 1998-2013. Gelatin silver print, 8 1/2 x 11 inches. © Nathan Lyons, courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, NY.

Nathan Lyons's exhibition, "Return Your Mind to Its Upright Position," is thoughtfully curated and immaculately precise. It features a selection of photographic diptychs from his newest book (of the same name) as well as a section dedicated to his earlier work, which functions like a miniature retrospective and serves to more than adequately contextualize the photographer and his vision. What one learns, almost immediately, is that Lyons' genius for establishing relationships between images is as strong as his ability to produce beautiful photographs.

Lyons shoots with a 35mm camera and makes five-by-seven-inch gelatin silver prints, which he mounts in pairs. In the last four decades he has not altered his presentation or methodology; nor has he greatly changed his subject matter. Through billboards, storefronts, graffiti, murals, memorials, placards and posters, his photographs speak to our collective desires, fears, anxieties, and ambitions. He may be the ultimate chronicler of our semiotic landscape, which has only grown increasingly manic.

*Return Your Mind* is Lyons' fourth book and the images it contains date between 1998 and 2014. Politics, race, war, death, loss, love — these are the themes that thread through the book and exhibition, creating a narrative that sprawls as it unfolds. The state of one's mind space seems to be Lyons' overarching concern. His title phrase, *Return Your Mind to Its Upright Position*, which is drawn from an photograph of an Amtrak billboard, suggests that our brains have been in recline and that it's time to wake them up, to ready them for some type of arrival. Closing out the series is a picture of a wall full of weathered posters, two of which read "Your Remedy...In Your Head." Lyons is not making a diagnosis of mental illness; he's appealing to our faculties of reason, imagination, and consideration.

There are rarely people in Lyons' photographs, but there are often pictures of people. One particularly devastating instance pairs a Reebok advertisement of the rapper 50 Cent



Nathan Lyons, Untitled (Return Your Mind to Its Upright Position), 1998-2013. Gelatin silver print, 4 7/8 x 7 1/4 inches. © Nathan Lyons, courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, NY.

with a Crime Stoppers billboard of a 14-year-old boy sporting cornrows. In a huge font across the billboard, “who killed me?” This is placed in conjunction with a quote by the rapper, which is superimposed over a police fingerprint record, “Where I am from there is no Plan B. So, take advantage of today because tomorrow is not promised.” Lyons doesn’t get didactic; he doesn’t need too. The message is clear: the promise of tomorrow didn’t hold out for the murdered boy and Reebok will use cases like his to authenticate the messages it employs to sell product. Lyons’s pairing adds a poignant racial addendum; the teen and the rapper are both unsmiling African-Americans. Their plight is being turned into an advertising strategy.

When one becomes adept at perceiving degrees of interconnectedness, instances of serendipity occur with increasing frequency. The image that starts the book (and opens the exhibition) is of an open hand with the phrase, “Don’t Believe Your Eyes” printed over the palm in capital letters. It rubs up against an axiom of an earlier photographic era when images were understood to contain certain degrees of truthfulness. But it also addresses Lyons’s larger concern about one’s mind space. How and why we are inclined towards belief or disbelief has much to do with the condition of our minds. When the appearance of an evident truth is ruptured, it destabilizes the seesaw of trust and doubt, of illusion and reality. On an individual level, this can be severely distressing; expanded to a social phenomenon, it can be all together dangerous because the systems and processes that hold a society together end up woefully undermined.



Nathan Lyons, Untitled (Return Your Mind to Its Upright Position), 1998-2013. Two gelatin silver prints, 4 7/8 x 7 1/4 inches each. © Nathan Lyons, courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, NY.

Lyons seems to have seen this situation coming. The themes he’s followed over the last 16 years reached a breaking point during the run of his show a commonly accepted belief in the truth-value of images was irrevocably overthrown on national media. Millions watched a video that showed a man named Eric Garner being choked to death by police officers, none of whom were indicted for any wrongdoing. The discrepancy between what a society saw, and what the society believed became too great. Protesters all over the country took to the streets calling for fundamental changes to the justice system. One of the key methods for making their message known was to create signs. When the news cameras zoomed in on the protestors’ cardboard placards, the television screen momentarily looked like an image by Lyons. In the instant that life seemed to mimic art, reality appeared to swell with the danger inherent in Lyons’s vision: that images

are interactive, their messages are malleable, and what they mean can be determined by how they are presented.

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