

Framing Romance: Ryan Spencer's Polaroid Power

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It's a good thing that Ryan Spencer's exhibition "Romance and Adventure" doesn't open until December at Dust Gallery in Las Vegas.

Spencer will show a series of Polaroid photographs with a common subject, the World Trade Center, and he is glad the work will be seen after the fifth anniversary observations of the

place is from TV or from movies," he says. "The iconography of the place was embedded in those buildings."

So far, Spencer has made 140 Polaroids. "My Netflix and library memberships definitely paid off," he explains.

Each image is the result of multiple generations, from film to digital video to Polaroid, resulting in small, blurry, not-quite-square depictions of the towers. In some cases, they are barely perceptible as two shadowy bars in the backgrounds of street scenes. In a shot from *End of Days*, they are seen through the slats of window blinds. In some films, such as *Queens Logic*, they appear through the Washington Square arch. Other films pair them with the Statue of Liberty. A few, such as *Armageddon*, show the towers in the process of destruction.

Spencer stores the images in a binder, each identified by film and time of appearance in it, but does not want the actual images in the gallery titled by film. Thus, another layer of distance accrues. Even the towers' incidental scene-setting is negated and the viewer is left a vitiated amulet, its powers certified by the number and variety of views, but nonetheless annulled. Spencer's degenerative process contrasts starkly with the fetishistic media treatment of the towers, sharply erupting in flame and collapsing again and again in anniversary obsequies.

In a sense, Spencer's WTC images are of a piece with his previous photographic series, in which he shot Super-8 footage of people and places, then froze the projections of those films to make a photograph—"stepping further and

further back from the experience," as he puts it. Spencer knows that calling into question the popular notion of photography's integrity as a record of reality is nothing new, but he likes playing on those expectations. "People see photography as reality and can sort of exploit that," he says.

"The product was really exceptional and very different and grainy," notes Dust Gallery co-owner Naomi Arin. "It looked like a different time in history." Still, she was concerned when Spencer told her about the WTC series and its potentially "heavy" content. "It wound up becoming more about the structures as a signifier for a place and time in history," she says. The towers were also "signifiers of our society and our success in being able to create such structures," Arin adds. "There's a comfort...they gave to us as viewers."

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September 11 attacks have receded, like the towers, into history. He had no thoughts of associating his photographs with the inevitable commemorations.

"That would almost seem too much of a schtick," says Spencer, a graduate of Pratt Institute. The series comprises Polaroids made from video images of the Twin Towers found in popular films. Spencer plays DVD's, freezes frames in which the towers appear and then shoots those moments with a Polaroid Spectra Pro.

Spencer, who earned a B.A. in studio fine arts from the University of Colorado in 1999, says he had only visited New York City a few times before starting work on his M.F.A. at Pratt. That was in August of 2001. He calls the series "an investigation" of the World Trade Center's iconic status, and of the ways filmmakers invoked the towers to establish setting. "What you know about a



Ryan Spencer, *He Got Game*, 2006. Polaroid, 2 7/8 x 3 9/16 in.