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## BLONDE ART BOOKS

# Visualize Total Annihilation

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*Such Mean Estate* — Ryan Spencer

Interview by Ashley McNelis



Ryan

Spencer, *Such Mean Estate* #55, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches

*From approximately 2011-2013, Ryan Spencer obsessively watched dozens of disaster films. Throughout the duration, he photographed approximately seventy-five images from the screen with his Polaroid Land camera. This archive of moments preceding, during the midst of, or in the aftermath of disaster became the darkly humorous monograph *Such Mean Estate*. By freezing and re-presenting cinematic moments running*

*the gamut from banal to dire, this collection allows the viewer to re-interpret what was once simply seen as entertainment. The images are an argument for a less apathetic and desensitized look at themes of destruction in visual culture. They now carry a heaviness that calls for a more serious look at the consequential and catalytic actions of humanity.*

*Such Mean Estate features an introductory essay by award-winning author Leslie Jamison. The launch party for Such Mean Estate will be held at powerHouse Arena on June 22nd and include a discussion between Spencer, Jamison and Ryan Britt. It will be available for purchase on June 30th.*

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Ashley McNelis: What is the connection to film in your practice?

Ryan Spencer: I've always had a strong visceral connection to movies. I often identified with what was happening on screen in my own life, a marker of time in the same way many people identify a particular song or book with a certain point in their lives. Although I have also had this experience reading fiction, poetry or nonfiction, I've always had a stronger affinity with the visual aspect of storytelling in film. For me, it has always been a more immediate experience of cultural memory. When I studied film in undergrad, I appreciated the way in which experimental and indie films acted as alternative means of collective expression or interpretation.

For a while I made my own Super 8 films without any real intention of showing them as movies. I would shoot them to later go back and pull stills from them to make still photographs. While I work in photography, I'm not really interested in the technology and gear. In that aspect, I'd say I'm actually a pretty poor photographer.



Ryan

Spencer, *Such Mean Estate #74*, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches

AM: What is the significance of the sub-genre of film you chose to work with?

RS: I wanted to do a project focused on the environment but with a certain amount of subtlety. The concept of disaster in film always intrigued me. What does our fascination with visualizing the destruction of humanity in film say about our understanding of the world? Our fears? Why is that so prevalent and so compelling?

I found this sub-genre of ecological disaster movies—“Cli-Fi” as I’ve since heard it referred to—where nature or disease or our perversion of nature is the villain. Nature doesn’t have a conscience. In a natural state, it’s not an enemy or an antagonist but in these films it becomes one. I was curious about how the human effect on the environment and the aftermath was portrayed. How is it a foil for humanity? How do you fight something as fucking big as nature? On some level, we already know that we are dooming ourselves; but we can’t damn the monster – we have to damn the person that created the monster, which is why I chose a quote from Frankenstein as an epigraph for the book.



Ryan

Spencer, *Such Mean Estate* #53, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches  
AM: What was the process like?

RS: I watched probably fifty to seventy-five movies obsessively. (*laughter*) The selections were intuitive. They just had to speak to the greater project. I re-photographed the screen using an old Polaroid Land camera from the 1970's. The way the camera could record, capture light and register all of the imperfections of the print itself spoke to a history and atmosphere differently than if I just say made a screen capture of the film on a laptop. I wanted the pictures to have my own authorship as well as a specific history of their own in the same way that the projection of a film is different from a digital one. By showing it, you are simultaneously destroying it.

I also had certain rules that I would try and follow. The main one was that you can't make out anyone's face. This was especially important because a lot of these films cast very recognizable actors. But also when everyone is looking towards something, like a tornado or birds or an explosion, as a viewer your gaze is also directed at that event in the picture.



Ryan Spencer, *Such Mean Estate #54*, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches

AM: There is an apparent chapter-based narrative constructed with the stills. How did you edit the book?

RS: Starting with about one hundred photographs, I grouped them together into loose chapters. The chapters were how I envisioned the general narrative of the book as well as that of many of the films: warning, exile, conflict, annihilation, searching and quietus. Separated by screen-like squares changing from white to black, they became visual pauses within the book. I had a general idea of the sequence, but I was really lucky to work with the designer Takaaki Okada who I think beautifully executed the final design and placement of the images and created the overall logic of the book itself.



Ryan

Spencer, *Such Mean Estate #16*, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches



Ryan

Spencer, *Such Mean Estate* #51, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches

AM: In an earlier discussion, you mentioned that both you and Leslie were interested in disaster narratives. Why did you approach her to write the essay for *Such Mean Estate*?

RS: Instead of an introduction to the series that was merely descriptive or critical, I wanted a piece of writing that would be a companion to the work; something to set it up and put the reader into a certain mindset.

I had read Leslie's wonderful essay in the Los Angeles Review of Books on the *Photography and the American Civil War* exhibit at the Met. What struck me was her response to those images—the power of the images themselves—that was, but not totally, beholden to history and context. I reached out to her through a mutual friend and was met with a very quick and enthusiastic response, discovering that we both pretty much loved disaster movies.

AM: Leslie, how did you prepare for and approach writing your essay for *Such Mean Estate*? Ryan mentioned that you sent short texts and playlists back and forth on the subject in the beginning.

Leslie Jamison: Ryan got in touch with me during this busy time when I was trying really hard to learn how to say “no” to things (I'd even started a notebook of no's, where I recorded everything I'd said no to), but when I saw his images, I knew I was in—my “no” reflex was dead to these images, and my response was immediate and unequivocal: I wanted to respond. I didn't know

what I wanted to say, but I knew I wanted to say *something*. I liked that feeling: an urge without a plan. Ryan and I shared an obsession with apocalypse films; somehow he'd tapped into an abiding fascination of mine without knowing that it was one—and the fact of that synchronicity appealed to me. I also liked how our collaboration worked, a loose synergy of call and response. He sent along various pieces of his process—quotes that he'd had in mind, an “apocalypse mixtape” of songs—so that I could share some version of his headspace as I wrote. One of the quotes he sent really struck me. It was from a Borges parable: “we do not feel horror because we are threatened by a sphinx, we dream of a sphinx in order to explain the horror we feel.” I think the piece I ended up writing was something like this kind of dream: I *felt* something quite strongly in response to Ryan's images, their blend of terror and anticipation and banality and oddity, but I needed to craft something that could hold this feeling—so I crafted a dialogue, a series of questions, a vessel for the awe and fear I'd felt but been unable to explain.



Ryan

Spencer, *Such Mean Estate #1*, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches



Ryan

Spencer, *Such Mean Estate* #22, unique panchromatic instant print, 2.9 x 3.7 inches

AM: Ryan, what do you hope the viewer will take away from viewing *Such Mean Estate*?

RS: I think of it as a black comedy with a social conscience. Most of the films that are the source material here are pretty absurd, but I think they point to the greater issue of how we understand ourselves in the world. Do we perceive ourselves as the end of history or part of a greater continuum? Although this project is somewhat satirical, I think we've reached a certain point where we understand that humans affect the environment. Global warming is an erroneous term. The language needs to be readjusted to be called climate instability; parts of the planet will become warmer or colder, there will be storms, things will unequivocally continue to change because of what we're doing. Global warming is a dated term and we need to stop arguing the semantics of twenty years ago. That's just deflection.

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**Ryan Spencer** is an artist, producer and photography book editor based in Brooklyn, New York. He is a graduate of the University of Colorado and received his MFA in photography from Pratt University. His series of Polaroids, *Romance & Adventure*, which chronicled the history of The World Trade Center in popular film was exhibited at Dust Gallery in Las Vegas, Nevada and featured in NY Arts Magazine in 2006. *Such Mean Estate* is Ryan Spencer's first monograph and first publication with powerHouse Books.

**Leslie Jamison** is the author of *The Empathy Exams*, a *New York Times* bestselling essay collection, and the novel, *The Gin Closet*, a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* First Fiction Award. Her work has appeared in *Harper's*, *Oxford American*, *A Public Space*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Believer*, and the *New York Times*, where she is a regular columnist for the *Sunday Book Review*. She is currently finishing a doctoral dissertation at Yale about addiction narratives.

**Ashley McNelis** is a Brooklyn-based writer, curator and art historian. She recently graduated with an MA in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University and is a frequent contributor to *BOMB Magazine*, *Blonde Art Books* and other online art publications.

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