



Josh Azzarella: Gone Missing

By Ben Davis
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The landscapes in Josh Azzarella's photos and short films are both familiar and strange, both banal and sinister—the definition of "uncanny." The Jersey-based artist uses digital trickery to meticulously edit out the central element in iconic political images, then rebuilds scenery in its place. Thus, the famous Life photo of the My Lai massacre becomes an eerily empty nature shot. In an Abu Ghraib snap, Lynndie England still gestures puckishly, but seems simply to be posing for friends rather than lording it over Iraqi detainees.

The idea is simple, but surprisingly multifaceted in its effects. On the one hand, viewing Azzarella's gallery of doctored pictures together, what jumps out is how many of these key historical moments are already the subject of suspicion and second-guessing. There's the hilltop at Iwo Jima, minus soldiers—but wasn't the original also restaged to add a suitably giant-sized flag? And there's a photo referencing the famous incriminating image of Lee Harvey Oswald in his backyard, only in this case, his hands are empty—a riff on the theory that the original, rifle-toting portrait was faked to frame him.

A short clip of the Pentagon is assembled from out-of-sequence security stills released after the 9/11 attacks (much pored over by conspiracy theorists). A security guard steps into the frame, gesturing at the building, but all evidence of impact has been erased. It's as if Azzarella literalizes the idea of a cover-up, at once mocking it and highlighting its real possibility.

If the theme here seems to be political paranoia, a short video loop incorporating the footage of Bobby Kennedy announcing Martin Luther King's assassination puts a different spin on the whole concept. In Azzarella's appropriation, Kennedy steps to the mic but his mouth doesn't move. No tragedy is announced. There's just an awkward pause. In this aspect, Azzarella's edited images represent art as lucid dreaming, self-consciously willing away the nightmare of history—even if, finally, the deliberate sense that something's missing reminds us that history will come back to haunt us, whether we want to turn away or not.