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VISUAL ARTS

May 31, 2015

## Wounds Of The Heart



*Silence Could Be  
The Most Eloquent Form Of Lying*

***Inside the Experience of Addiction:  
Photo Stories on Using, Abusing, and Recovery***

Review by Keith Waits

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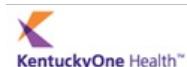
An exhibit of photographs about addiction may not seem to promise much more than darkness and despair, but Keith Auerbach's *Inside the Experience of Addiction: Photo Stories on Using, Abusing, and Recovery*, does have that one hopeful word on the end: recovery; and it is that feeling of hope that alleviates any foreboding the viewer may have about the subject. It permeates the artist's perspective throughout, even in the images that touch upon the depths of desperation that one finds in the early stages of the journey.

Auerbach lays out the pictures in a linear narrative so that they function somewhat like chapters in a book. He is arguably more storyteller than visual artist in this instance, charting with forensic insight the emotional travelogue inside the addicted individual. You won't find any gruesome junkie-in-an-alleyway horror show pictures here; some of the black & white prints are, in fact, actually quite humorous. After all, this is the man who published an earlier volume of work under the title *The Photographic Humor of Keith Auerbach*.

So leave apprehension at the door. This work is deeply informed by Auerbach's frontline experiences dealing with addiction as a psychiatrist. Years of such observation allow the artist to build a vivid and compassionate context for his acerbic take on the episodic nature of recovery. Some of the work is straightforward enough: "The Labels Warned Me Away But The Thrill Claimed Me" shows a woman receiving a light from a leather-clad arm that evokes a mid-century period feeling (before the surgeon general warning) with a slight sense of dread, and "There Is Always A Dialogue Between Me And My Inner Critic" captures a graphic of a naked male figure, a long-forgotten poster on a city street, now imprisoned behind steel bars. These are striking enough, but another artist might have also made such didactic connections to the theme.

But when we encounter a man adopting a pose next to a small automobile with the legend "Do Not Take My Illusion For My Complete Reality", or "The First Courageous Decision Is The Hardest", we are forced to smile and ponder the meaning of the joke. In the latter image a diver is poised at the penultimate instant of contact with the diving board; there is so much tension in the frame, perfectly capturing the moment before the leap; but a leap into the darkness of addiction, or into newfound faith in one's own abilities to cope? The title suggests the latter; an echo of the old adage that the first step in dealing with any problem is recognizing that there IS a problem. The unique sensibility we encounter in such light-hearted images, that have, at first look, no obvious relationship to the subject, is what gives the work distinction.

That ambiguity invites the viewer to draw his or her own conclusions throughout the exhibit. Is the title "By



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The Time I Was Old Enough To Understand The Wounds Of My Heart Were Deep", a reference to the history of pain held by the woman in the picture, or a forecast of the future experience of the baby she is carrying? When we spy, through a storefront, two young lovers holding hands at a café table in "Silence Could Be The Most Eloquent Form Of Lying", which figure is being dishonest? Could it be both?

That all of this speaks to the complex web of damage, pain, motivation, and self-destructiveness of alcohol and drug addiction, only those who have been down this path may accurately attest; the rest of us must place faith in the artist; but Auerbach does something that

elevates the material beyond the confines of the recognized framework: he uses the specificity of the recovery nomenclature to establish universality and commonality for the viewer; an identification with the experiential beats of addiction that we might come to discover in other obsessive patterns of behavior; watching television or surfing the internet for example. In a time when companies are forcing employees to take "offline" vacations in which they must turn in all company-issued electronic devices so that time on the beach doesn't suffer the incessant connecting with the world through a digital screen, the parameters of addictive behavior has clearly expanded beyond the clichéd tropes of substance abuse.



*By The Time I was Old Enough To Understand  
The Wounds Of My Heart Were Deep*

#### **Inside the Experience of Addiction: Photo Stories on Using, Abusing, and Recovery**

May 14-June 27, 2015

Thursday-Saturday, 12:00-6:00pm

First Friday Trolley Hop: June 5, 6:00-9:00pm

PYRO Gallery  
909 E. Market Street  
Louisville, KY 40206  
502-587-0106  
[pyrogallery.com](http://pyrogallery.com)



Keith Waits is a native of Louisville who works at Louisville Visual Art during the days, including being one of the hosts of PUBLIC on ARTxFM, but spends most of his evenings indulging his taste for theatre, music and visual arts. His work has appeared in Pure Uncut Candy, TheatreLouisville, and Louisville Mojo. He is now Managing Editor for Arts-Louisville.com.

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