

ARTslant

The ghosts of the past in the paraphernalia of domestic nostalgia

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The ghosts of the past are easily summoned in the paraphernalia of domestic nostalgia. But the familiarity of quotidian objects can also mask the deep value with which they are imbued by their owners, making our own history often so difficult to catalog. After all, a family heirloom is just another thing outside the family. These vessels of the past are always

tinged with a sense of loss, and that sense of loss transforms and doubles when the story and sentiment are drained away. This is what makes looking at someone else's family albums so strange; you have to make up their story, building a past out of unfamiliar fragments.

In recent work on view at Fitzroy Gallery, Colby Bird presents photographs and sculptures that deal with these ever-shifting tones of nostalgia, labor, and loss as well as the often indirect paths that each can take. The exhibition title, *Clyde Glenn Burns*, while purportedly the name of a brief acquaintance of Bird's, reveals little, serving as a yet another private cul-de-sac of memory that the viewer is only ever partly privy to. The works on display are from three discrete series, each echoing past lives and functions while resounding with the overpowering sensation of loss.

The most eye-catching works are the photographs from Bird's *Leisure* series (2013). These are presented as both clusters and singular pieces. Each photograph is framed by a color taken from the Kodak Color Control Patch, which was often used to ensure accurate colors for reproduction. Bird's prints are solarized, with the sepia-toned fidelity of antique photographic processes, and carry images of depleted memories:



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people, places, and objects lost to overexposure. The subjects – a weathered barn, ducks in a pond, a simply carved jack-o'-lantern, the overgrown foliage – and their presentation have a cadence at odds with our current era of fleeting instantaneity. Bird's use of the Kodak colors provides further analog resonance to the images—asking those aware of their significance to question the staying power of the binary calculations of a digital image.

In addition to these photo works, Bird is showing a series of table lamps, *House Lamps* (2013), along with a series of sculpturally refigured Thonet-style bentwood chairs. While the House Lamps are functional, the chairs have been selectively cut and reassembled using the original factory curves used as guides. Bird's new configurations for the chairs cannot match the simplicity of the factory originals, and although the lamps are superbly constructed, they offer little else beyond craftsmanship to consider.



The signature Thonet curlicues that appeared the height of industrial whimsy become a historical digression in these works, indicating little more than the sculpture's intended conjuring of a golden yesteryear.

While most of the works are strictly aesthetic, with one work, *Chair* (2013), Bird alludes to utility. For this piece, the former bases of the two chairs have been

attached to one another – seats touching – while fruit, real and ersatz, commingle together on top of the improvised table. The passage of time is implied by the decaying fruit that rests alongside its plastic counterpart. Bird has used the limitations of manufacture to restyle these chairs into something unprecedented, and often structurally unsound, in the process, commending the design of the original in a conversation with history.

In no small part, all of this work deals with inheritance; what we receive from the past, but also what is to be made of it. This is perhaps a decidedly analog form of thinking; the acuity of memory is dulled over the years, with recall always filled with the mystery and the unpredictability that each roll of film can yield. Changes to the narrative are accepted, but the longing for the story itself remains.