



**ADELINE
GRAFFITI
PALACE**

OAKTOWN

ADELINE GRAFFITI PALACE
© 2023 Malcolm Ryder & Constance Hale

Text: Constance Hale
Images: Malcolm Ryder



www.malcolmryder.com
www.constancehale.com



TEXTS & SUBTEXTS

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ADELINE GRAFFITI PALACE

Malcolm Ryder, the artist behind the sprawling photo survey *OAKTOWN*, moves easily between documentary and fine art. His collaborator, the journalist and poet Constance Hale, helps Ryder curate the photos into series that range from cultural narratives to aesthetic meditations.

In *Adeline Graffiti Palace*, they transform the environmental work of a dozen street artists at an urban ruin into a suite of images that amplify the beauty, balance, and abstraction that are hiding in plain sight. The street artists appropriated the abandoned industrial yard, but Ryder and Hale appropriate that landscape and reshape it into an expression of their own aesthetic. Call it sampling.

One afternoon in July 2022, on one of his routine scouts—foraging for photographic subjects—Malcolm Ryder glimpsed the kind of urban ruin that captures his imagination.

It was an abandoned work yard in an industrial section of West Oakland, on the 2500 block of Adeline Avenue, an artery that cuts a gentle diagonal, north to south, through Berkeley, North Oakland, and West Oakland to the Oakland Estuary. Adeline Avenue doesn't so much link these areas (which it once did), as skirt them. Passersby do just that: they pass by.

The portal to the Adeline ruin was gated, locked—and vulnerable. From the sidewalk, Ryder surveyed the architecture: walls that remained standing after invasions, collisions, and interventions (of machines, weather, and time). Rebar that reached skyward in rusted futility. Walls that hinted at a past about which they were now indifferent, screamed a present about which they were exuberant, and promised a future in which they would, surely, be undone.

Ryder stalked the site until one day the gate was unlocked.

“When I entered,” he recalls, “I felt like, ‘I’m a guest.’ The place had a gate, the gate had a lock, but the lock was open. It’s as if someone opened it for me. Everything said, ‘Come inside.’ And when I did, I had the entire place to myself.” He pulled out his camera.

In the spaces left by man’s chaos and nature’s ravages, Ryder discovered an array of sightlines, from one vertical wall to another, and sometimes over them or through them—to a display of an enormous collection of mid-to-large scale art—not murals, graffiti. He had stumbled upon a giant hidden gallery. The works on view, by more than a dozen different artists, transformed the pocked surfaces into distinctive, room-like areas within the confines of the site. These arrangements had no greater purpose than display: they did not advocate, argue, or subvert anything in particular, but instead made the entire location a total immersion in shape, color, scale, and emotional energy.

“Street artists had entirely repurposed the ruin of the original building,” Ryder recalls. “Not ‘so-and-so *was* here, but so-and-so *is* here.’ I felt their presence and I felt wrapped in the dazzling

mosaic of work. At the same time, I could see that giving the many different parts of it a good hard stare would yield as many different resonances.”

“One impulse was to document the entire location in exhaustive detail, to protect against its future disappearance. But another impulse, stronger and more personal, was to gain control over its visual heterogeneity, by reorganizing my mental scan of its views, choosing my own perspective, and arranging my own composition of it with my camera. I would be appropriating again what they had already appropriated.”

“Documenting is also imagining, and they reinforce each other. I would use *their* pictures as raw material for *my own* pictures. As usual, I would treat the space within my camera frame as a blank canvas onto which I could “paint” colors and shapes. I select items from a found environment and arrange them on my picture surface.”

Enter Constance Hale. Her initial role is as the person Ryder first shows the pictures to. She bears witness to his re-envisioning. Then, in conversation, they shape an understanding of the story they might tell. Ryder says, “Her sensibility for abstraction and composition, although different from mine, further allows us both to see the pictures as ‘canvases’ in their own right. But she is a storyteller, who also sees and surfaces a narrative in the pictures. I gain an additional experience of what I saw because of Connie.”

Hale lays the first draft of accompanying texts in each series. She finds a unifying story. (In this case, a fantastical journey through a mythical place.) Together they revise, review, and re-view. Hale allows herself to riff wildly, hoping her imaginative leaps may give viewers permission to make their own. She looks for wordplay, or way that the artists are not just tagging, but commenting on the industrial aspects of the place—whether through the pseudo-industrial lettering of JNCO, robot-like creatures, or even the glassware of a mad (or heartbroken) lab scientist.

While they create work ready for showing in conventional art galleries, Ryder and Hale always seek new audiences in unconventional venues—whether libraries, restaurants, schools, or, one day, a book. “We want to get the photos out into the communities of people who might be especially affected by seeing the photos,” says Hale. “They might see their neighborhoods differently; they might see themselves differently.”

A sense of the ephemeral infuses much of this work. Like Adeline Graffiti Palace, the magical places Ryder and Hale adopt are at high risk of being suddenly wiped out—repainted, repurposed, torn down, or replaced. In the long run, the places are as fleeting as sunsets, memories, climaxes, cobwebs, or tales whispered in the dark. The photos become the memorial not just of a moment’s existence but of its meaning.

—*Malcolm Ryder and Constance Hale, March 2023*

PALACE INTRIGUE

Around Oakland, any number of buildings stand in some state of suspended animation. A place may be closed temporarily, after a change of owners. It harbors hope of renovation. Or it may be a disintegrating but stubborn ruin, likely scheduled for full demolition.

The social norm is to think of such places as eyesores to be avoided, assets to be hidden, or opportunities to be exploited. There can be a competition among the three, or a dance. We urban dwellers usually encounter these buildings randomly, with no explanation given as to why they are the way they are. We get used to living with them without ever truly looking at them.

But the camera forces us to look, to reconsider, to see anew—regardless of what the building was in the past and what it will become in the future.

Is it a camp, a monument, a temple, or a palace?

Camps are random, even accidental collections—a community of people or things that has come into being. Monuments are intentionally built, most often as memorials. Temples embrace and contain the presence of a spirit, one that bestows importance on anything within it. (That presence can make three big rocks into a temple.)

But a palace is a shrine to itself.

It elevates its details from the gratuitous to the grand. It creates its own spirit. We may not know how it got there or why, but *for the experience it wants us to have*, we don't need to.

To us, the abandoned yard on Adeline featured in these photos is no longer industrial. It has a community function, social authority, and legitimacy, but it's not a park or civic space. It's a sanctuary for a cultural aesthetic. It is a *statement*. Despite its off-road invisibility, it is an emphatic announcement of the presence of a community.

What makes this a *palace* is the attention to the visibility of display space for *all of* the wall writing. This is a sensibility we expect from professional exhibition planners or interior designers, but not from street artists. We walk through the space in a way that is suggested by the architecture, noticing the way the art wittily responds to the walls and windows and rebar. The raw paths lacing through the yard accord the walls a felt sculptural scale. Meanwhile, the images are not in the service of any other event; the site exists purely to make an impression on the person within it.

So the works collectively compose an enclosed environment completely different from anything else near it. They celebrate its own aesthetic force.

—*Malcolm Ryder and Constance Hale, March 2023*

1. GROUNDS



CH:

Photographs record facts, composition orchestrates them, editing seeks a truth. We debated about how to open this series. The journalist in me wanted to give a sense of the whole place, to ground the series in the function and the grit of an industrial yard. But the poet in me wanted to start with something less literal. The journalist won out, but perhaps only in this shot. Malcolm wanted to start with “Portal.”

MR:

In this series, I saw the chance to show a kind of beauty, an intrinsic value, in what is too often presumed to be disorderly (unauthorized, unformal, assertively blighting) and worthless.

CH:

Yes, we get to see “grit” in a different way, to see the life in the ruins. And the way you as a photographer, roam through this place gives it a new order, and represents any viewer’s imagination, the freedom to roam. We both see this series as a chance to model a new order, me as a writer. I always seek the intersection of literal description and poetry.

2. THE GATE



CH:

When I look at this, I think of Dante and the opening of the *Inferno* (“*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*”) What journey awaits us? Who will be our guide? But this is so playful—light-hearted and oddly beautiful—that it promises a non-hellish adventure, if we are open to it.

MR:

This is about the first thing I saw when I walked through an opening in an outer wall. Immediately you are looking at things, and through things, at the same time.

CH:

My mind is firing. I love the visual pun of what we see through the aperture of the stony patchwork building: quilts... in giant writing but here rendered small. And it kills me that this is essentially red, white, and blue. Like the flag, but so *not* a flag.

3. FRUIT BOWL



MR:

I couldn't resist the lyricism, the light palette, the visual trickery of this closeup. It's as though we're looking at a wall hung with two pictures. On the left, someone decided to use the wall opening as a frame for another drawing; on the right, it's a hole that I decided to use the same way, by putting another picture in it.

CH:

This photo is a still life on steroids. The bowl of fruit is a bit of wit by the tagger. That Malcolm puts it in the center of *his* photo makes the whole thing subversive. "Take *that*, Cézanne."

4. PORTAL



MR:

In this shot, there's a lot that I did on the picture surface. We have shadows, streaks of light, things that already had paint on them, things written by taggers. We have the horizontal bar of black paint at right put there by the writer, and the diagonal shadow that I made sure was there to complement that. We have window frame paint. And we have sky.

CH:

We have concrete, peeling paint, weeds; we have power boxes, bubbles, spears. And we have letters, we have BABY. The photographer is improvising with the artists in the way a trumpeter would with a drummer. We have jazz.

Another thing. The electric box, the power meter, is a visual cue to remind us of where we've been. This picture says: Transition. We are moving from the "foyer" into other rooms.

I can't figure out if that mass of red on the right is ominous or frivolous. Is it a pool of blood or a balloon? That thought sets me up on how I see the next room: and the BABY.

5. CHAMBER



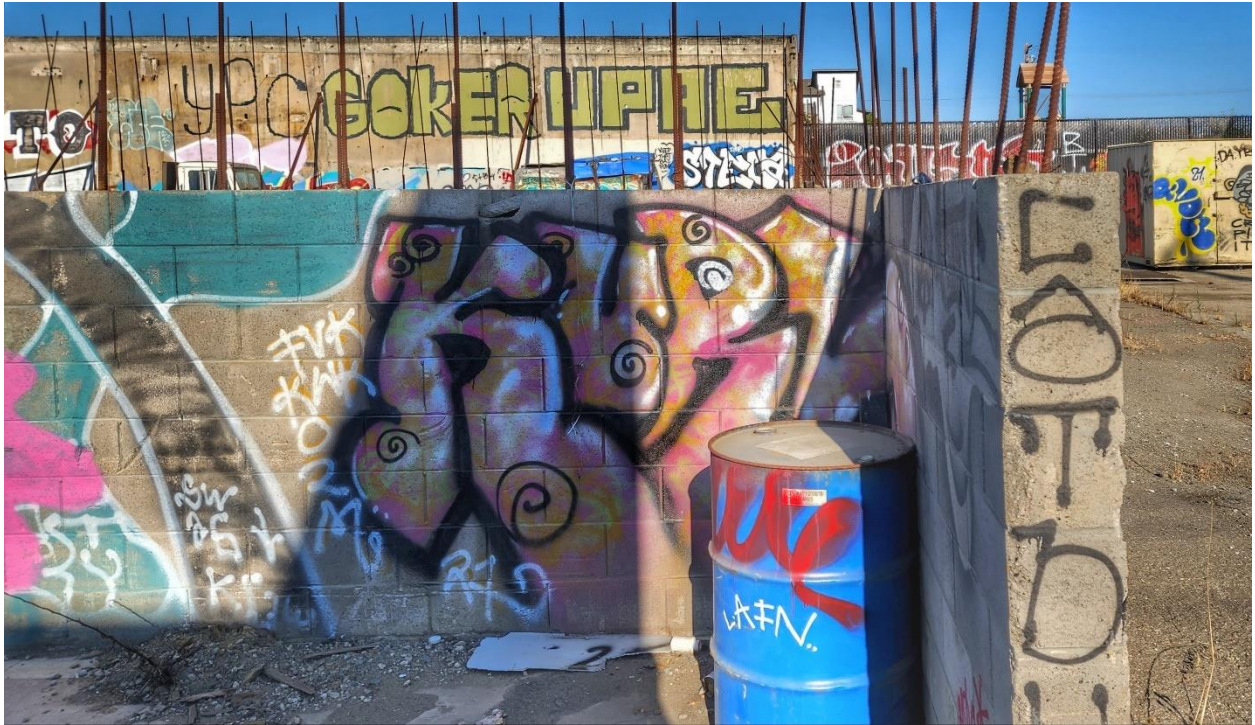
MR:

Now we have a narrative bit—setting. We see the world outside, which tells us that we are in a hidden, secret, recondite world inside. And it contains another narrative bit: There are words, there is dialogue. There is a jumble of voices all talking to each other, or over each other. Is it story?

CH:

There's a dog (Wag), and a baby sitting on a rug on the floor of the room (BABY), making noises (EEK). And here's the babysitter, or the uncle, or someone trying to make the baby laugh ... and, oh, wait, what's that green zombie over there? The monster in the closet. Then someone comes along and says to it, FUCK OFF! And where does "Goodnight Moon" take the conversation?

6. COURTYARD



MR:

This place feels like it does because of the way these writers wanted it to be. There's exuberance in how they'll write on anything: a wall, a curve, a corner, an edge.

But the picture defines how it tells us that, how we see it. The rhythm of high walls, low walls, corners, curves, sizes. Textures, marks and colors taken and used from the barrel, the rebar prongs, the sky. And the shadow helps divide the space into blocks; but it is now also a metaphor for my presence there.

CH:

The quiet eloquence of the sky. Is it a sideways blue note, a tipped-over bench, a backwards "L", or infinite silence?

7. STRUT



MR:

This view is most aggressively emblematic of my general style; where despite preserving an “untampered” sense of observation, everything on this picture surface is *placed* by me. The idea of amplifying what it is; converting a scene into an artwork without eliminating the literal presence of the scene; a sense of large physical scale *and* a sense of intimacy; elevating the devalued visible into something of visual value.

CH:

Malcolm picked this title. He intends it as a noun. The verb is just as apt.

8. MAZE



MR:

Out of all of pictures in this set, this is the best example of what I do as a photographer with abstraction, taking over the visual elements in front of me and using them the way I want to. My decisions as a composer arranges things *on* my picture surface. The picture is built, not found. It's not unlike assembling puzzles or making collages. It is an invention, not just a record.

But again I intend to preserve the “reality” of the scene’s appearance. You can see what I saw if you stood where I did when I did. I don’t change what was there. I emphasize that much of what we look at is usually not “seen” the way I show it.

9. BED OF GOLD



MR:

Still in the courtyard. I always try to find that balance point between a kind of documentary realism and the artifice of the photo on its own as a piece.

As a picture maker, I have everything placed *on* the picture surface for a reason. But it's a way of seeing even before the picture gets made.

CH:

I could stare at this picture forever.

And not just for Malcolm's idea of "graphical composition." This makes me think of how so often we can't see beyond the banal. Old buildings, abandoned trucks. Mishmashes. And then, in the click of a shutter, something sublime.

10. HEART FULL OF GLASS



MR:

I wanted this picture to feel like the graffitists had violated a modernist painting. The wall and those two containers, those rectangular blocks of color—they compete with the graffiti for attention. It's like what's behind the words was one surface made by an artist, and then other artists came and put other stuff on it. In my own layout, I'm thinking about how drawing and layering and “collaged sections” construct this visual illusion of the scene—a hyper-reality.

CH:

Mentally remove all the words from this picture. Then you see the “canvas” as an abstraction.

But wait. How can we ignore the graffiti? The graffiti is everything. How evocative is “Heart Full of Glass”?

11. JNCO



CH:

In literary endeavors we often say “in the particular, the universal.” JNCO as much as any image in this series reveals that hyper-literal description can yield very high levels of abstraction. This piece is, if less high-brow, as interesting as a Hans Hoffman in its lines, a Jasper Johns in its signals, and a Robert Rauschenberg in its layered effect. The four parallel walls, the truck heads peeking out. That deep blue sky. And, oh my, the rebar. Askew, reaching to heaven.

Spend time in Oakland, and you’ll see JNCO on numerous walls. But here it’s different—the “font” makes the letters themselves industrial, like bolts, or a super fat metal chain. And the horizontal pipe joining them is in conversation with the vertical rebar.

And one last thing. This may seem random, but I grew up in Hawai‘i, where as kids we played “Rock, Paper Scissors”, in Japanese called “Jan Ken Pon”. We didn’t pronounce the terminal “n” so the phrase echoes JNCO. Nonsensically, this is what I “hear” when I see JNCO. What I love about tags, and why we elevate some of them as captions, is that they trigger all kinds of free associations in the viewer.

12. ZECTO



MR:

I started making this because I liked the typography; three styles of black and white lettering, all talking to each other.

CH:

But this is overall also a triptych, without even trying hard. Left, center, right.

MR:

I also wanted to put those rebar struts in there right there where they are. It was becoming my own “tag”, my way of “writing on the wall”. The steel beams obviously hold up the wall; but they are equally just placed on the picture surface, nearly in 3D, almost like I’d drawn them there after the fact with a magic marker.

CH:

Mary Weatherford throws neon tubes on her abstract paintings, Malcolm throws on rusty rebar.

13. MAYOR



MR:

Graffiti sprouts on unmanaged territory like wild plants. It always makes sense that way. And the artist even gives us a jungle creature to check out.

CH:

Here, juxtaposition speaks. The walls and the weeds, the artificial and the organic, the natural flora and the human flora. This literally and metaphorically is an “urban jungle.” This shot, its green, also has a kind of intimacy I love—it says, “Come into my corner.” It’s a feminine beckoning smack in the middle of all this massive, alpha male energy.

And free-associating again: is the subject of this shot a municipal official, a tagger with special hubris, or a Spanish comment on the grandness of this place?

14. SHED



MR:

I wanted to emphasize the stillness of this part of the yard, with the tension between being usable and not being usable. I wanted to keep that small structure visually “closed” but still have the evidence that people make it do what they want. It’s a microcosm of the whole site.

CH:

The shed is such an overt symbol of human presence. And look at the way the color—magenta?—and the lyricism of those lines adds to the sense of human presence. This photo says: “People spend time here.” Except that they don’t any more. So nostalgia seeps into the series.

15. CYN



CH:

Close to the finish now, this picture is of where you last hang out in the Palace, the last you see before you go around the wall and leave the site, returning to the outside world.

MR:

You can hear the docent: “This is the end of the show. The bookstore and bathrooms are down the hall to the right. And don’t miss the yellow tractor.”

CH:

Free thought: is Cyn pronounced Sin? My mind is taking me back again to Dante.

16. WACKER



MR:

We end the series where we started it: a broad view, a memory even, of the site. The very first image is the larger more distant setting, a dormant site with vehicles listing in an abandoned yard, and its exterior walls indifferently hinting at what more is to come; gates, interior walls and enclosed spaces, I focused on its aesthetic energy, with its flat surfaces and planes and cubes and angles and diagonals. But leaving it, with a different visual energy, I'm also reminding us that the yard once had a function.

CH:

The series has a rhythm. And these aren't just any ruins, And here, there is something wonderful about the half kilter Wacker. See the orientation of the "horizon"? And the slanting rooftop in the background? After all of the carefully "drawn" and "constructed" photos, this one to me emphasizes the way "snapshot" mode can allow us to see things that careful staging preempts. The way a portal, a fragment, a line of a poem, can fire the imagination, triggering memories or just sensations. What *you* see, what *you* feel: that's what this photo is about, as it returns you to the outside, again.

AFTERWORD

This series surfaces a critical question for me when I'm shooting something already made in part or in whole by other artists—whether it be an object or an environment: what is *my* work with it doing, that *their* work is not already doing?

In this series, we're talking about a neglected place made *as is* by street artists—but their work suffers its own neglect, due to public prejudices about who made it and why. Can I change the way people see—or don't see—their world?

I don't know any of the people who actually created this art. But because they did this, I think about them in a certain way.

My thoughts have to do with the energy of all of it: the variety of styles, the colorfulness, the boldness, and an *amazingly orderliness of the* collection of graffiti. This is not a result of a party, a purposeless gang, of a bunch of drunk people, or of angered hoodlums. The whole display looks deliberate. There is respect amongst the group; people didn't cover each other's stuff up. It sits completely free of the institutional exclusivity of some museum, but artists took a ruin and transformed it into a dazzling, well-structured place.

From an endangered site, they made a show. Indeed, it's a "palace." But now, as before, no one can go there, inside, to see this—possibly ever again. At some point, this remaining vision of the site is going to be *the only* vision of it.

—Malcolm Ryder, March 2023

HOW WE SEE

When we look at a work of visual art such as a painting or photograph, the picture triggers activity in our mind that becomes what we actually experience. Naturally we associate that experience with the picture. I call the item we looked at the “Picture” but I call the mindful experience of the picture the Image.

I am strongly aware that the word “photography” literally means “drawing with light”. It is true literally. And when we think of how a drawing changes a piece of paper to create the link between what the artist is noticing and what the viewer will notice, the name describes what I do too; it is not just metaphorically accurate as my approach.

I’m a composer. In *Adeline Graffiti Palace*, I get a chance, through my creative method, to allow various kinds of abstraction to amplify how the photos express concrete things. In that way I intend to affect the viewer by provoking an image in their mind.

As a maker of “new” pictures, I always accept that first there is nothing. I start with a “blank slate”, an “empty canvas”, a “white screen”... and my role is to decide what to put on it. I take control over where things going to be on that blank surface. I’ll compose the picture by choosing things – the lines, colors, shapes, and textures – and arranging them on that blank surface,

As a visual composer, I’m awash in choices of technique. I could use all kinds of instruments, including pens, scissors, brushes and computers, to come up with the things I will select and arrange. We see people do this all the time: sketching, painting, assembling puzzles, doing collage.

I use a camera. My approach is that everything in front of me and my camera is a candidate visual item that I can select and arrange on my picture surface, with my lens.

As an artist, I’m making decisions about what to select and how to arrange things, and especially making intentional decisions about what to leave out as well as what to include. In that sense, everything that I need to make a picture is in front of my lens. With my camera, I find the point of view that I need to control what winds up included, where, and how.

The rest of the effort is more aesthetic – it’s about the Why. Why does something visual, something that is included, lead to the experience had from seeing it? In a photograph, part of the answer is in how the visuals work with each other, including what they may provide as information. Another part is mainly due to the viewer’s preexisting sensitivities, which can be emotional and/or intellectual, conscious and/or unconscious. A viewer brings senses that are “tuned” by knowledge, belief, need, desire, habit, and curiosity. Since people are as different from each other as they may be alike, presenting the same single picture to them all can provoke wide variation in what forms in their respective minds as the “image”.

What a viewer brings to a picture might be bias on the one hand, or insightfulness on the other. The picture doesn’t change, but it has to make an impact with the opportunity allowed by what the viewer brings. Sometimes, the strongest impact occurs because the picture will amplify or

contradict what the viewer brought. And sometimes, as impact, the picture teaches or reveals something the viewer didn't bring and never had.

Making neither snapshots nor traditional street photography, I compose pictures in a way that still intends to preserve the "reality" of appearance. You can see what I saw if you stood where I did at the time I was there, without a camera and without changing what was there. But I equally intend to emphasize that much of what we look at is usually not "observed" the way I show it.

My decisions as a composer mean that the picture is built, not found. Often I make pictures with sections that you can take apart and put back together again, while as well I put things on my picture surface in creating it. It is an invention, not just a record. My result demonstrates how things can be seen. At best, that then changes how people try to see things for themselves.

- *Malcolm Ryder*





www.malcolmryder.com

www.constancehale.com