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[Societal decay, captured in images of the remains of the day](#)

- [Kenneth Baker](#)

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Even a quick look at the images in Bay Area photographer Katherine Westerhout's "Winter Light" deepens the meaning of the series' title. Suddenly it evokes a historical moment as much as a time of year, an existential season with no spring in prospect.

Westerhout specializes in documenting the ruins of abandoned industrial and institutional spaces. Approached from a socio-political angle, her pictures look like elegies for a society that once made things -- in addition to profit -- but no longer does.

To a formalist eye, they present elegant studies of the ways that light discloses architectural space and constructs a pictorial space and a photographic surface design.

"Mississippi I" (2005) looks out from the pulpit area into the remains of a church, resembling a large meeting hall, damaged by fire and water. Windows on upper and lower stories girdle the space with radiant daylight. Softer light enters like a snowfall through a hole in the roof and ceiling made by collapsing debris.

The cave-in makes grotesquely literal the opening of the church ceiling to the heavens depicted in church dome decorations by several of the greatest European Mannerist and Baroque painters. The balcony baluster splits the picture roughly in half horizontally, echoing Westerhout's practice of shooting derelict interiors redoubled by their reflections in the standing water she often finds in them. She has done this in "Louisiana III" (2005) in the present selection.

The chromatic subtlety of Westerhout's pictures offsets the sadness that pervades them. They also bespeak a patience in the search for the right subject, vantage point and time of day that rebukes the haste to which automatic media give rise. In the present show, only "Pilgrim III" (2005), from the interior of a disused mental hospital, appears ill-chosen. An air of misery still hangs too heavy in the space it pictures, tipping the image too far into documentary.

Trillium Press of Brisbane has printed Westerhout's images using a pigmented inkjet process, giving them a dreamlike soft brilliance of color and density of resolution.

Like Robert Polidori, whose images Westerhout's sometimes recall, she exploits the tension between aesthetics and content, rooting camerawork in reality in a manner that may have a future even in the digital age.

Katherine Westerhout: Winter Light: photographs. Through Oct. 8. Swarm Gallery, 560 Second



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