

'Ghosts' reopens an entryway to America The Boston Globe

By Mark Feeney
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WINCHESTER - How many of us know what the buildings at Ellis Island look like? It's not somewhere that calls to mind specific images. Perhaps that's as it should be, since, really, it doesn't so much designate a place or institution as an idea or aspiration. It's a sacred American site, like "Mount Vernon," "Gettysburg," "Ground Zero." Yet where they are all homes (once for the living, now for the dead), Ellis Island is something quite different. It offered entry to a home. It's a transit point, not a resting place.

Stephen Wilkes, Ellis Island:
Ghosts of Freedom
The Portrait Collages:
Photographs by Paula Gillen
Running Through the Wind:
Photographs by Frank Rothe
At the Griffin Museum of
Photography, 67 Shore Road,
Winchester, through March 30.
Call 781-729-1158 or go to
griffinmuseum.org.

Between 1998 and 2003, Stephen Wilkes obsessively set about to record the then-current state of Ellis Island's outlying buildings - not the Great Hall and visitors center where tourists go. The island consists of three sites: the original one, Island 1, and, south of that, two man-made locations, Islands 2 and 3. It's these latter two, where the medical facilities were located, that Wilkes photographed.

There are 29 pictures in "Stephen Wilkes: Ellis Island Ghosts of Freedom," which runs at the Griffin Museum of Photography through March 30, and they are very big. The largest are 4 feet by 5 feet. Size may not be the most imposing thing about them, though. That would be Wilkes's use of color, which is rich, delicate, and lustrous. The scale of these pictures gets your attention. Their color holds it. The color is so ravishing, in fact, the temptation to dismiss it as lavish prettiness would be great - except that it creates such an effective contrast with the shocking decay of these interiors. Where grainy black and white would complement the ruination, rendering it picturesque even, Wilkes's colors make the squalor seem that much more unnerving.

Dismaying though it may be, the diseased look of these rooms can be seen as fitting. We think of Ellis Island as a place of welcome and acceptance. It was also a place of expulsion and eradication, with its morgue and psychiatric hospital and wards dedicated to measles and tuberculosis and - scariest of all - isolation. Isolation is now the condition of them all. And there is an extraordinary power to the emptiness of rooms whose great purpose - whose sole claim on memory - was their having been full of humanity.

Indeed, it's the absence of ghosts that does so much to give Wilkes's pictures their great impact. There's an elemental quality to them that's at once thrilling and a little crazed. What Wilkes shows is the collision between light (glorious, rapturous) and solid (thick, collapsing). No ectoplasm comes between the two, not even the ghostliest ectoplasm of all: memory.

The deserted state of the rooms makes any irregularity in them stand out all the more. In "Measles Ward, Oak File Cabinets, Island 3, Ellis Island," the cabinet drawers are open. Did Wilkes pull them out to achieve the quite striking effect or were they already like that? Out thrust, they look like accusations: a mad pile of steps to nowhere - or maybe to the past (a different kind of nowhere). *Continued...*

Page 2 of 2 -- "Tuberculosis Ward, Statue of Liberty, Island 3, Ellis Island" mocks any idea of healing: the peeling paint, the broken fixture, the skin of grit on the back of a sink. And yet there, in the mirror - is it sick joke or pledge of faith? - we glimpse the Statue of Liberty. Don't forget, she's an immigrant, too. To be sure, her back is turned in the reflection. What saves her positioning from being hackneyed irony is the smallness of the mirror and the reflection of the blue sky, which makes the mirror look like a window (as always, Wilkes exploits color superbly).

Stephen Wilkes, *Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom*

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Wilkes has a way with little rectangles. In "Psychiatric Hospital, Wall Study With Light Switch, Island 2, Ellis Island," a switch plate could be the door to another universe, its unyielding angles and blank purposefulness seem that much at odds with the cracked and curled paint that surround it.

Vines snake over interior walls and hang from the ceiling in "Snow-Covered Corridor, Island 3, Ellis Island," an explosion of nature amid the mass of man-made waste. If it weren't for the title, you'd

hardly notice the snow.

Each photograph has a lengthy accompanying text, taken from Wilkes's 2006 book, "Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom." The words reflect the unmistakable passion of the images. They are also, frankly, overwrought. The pictures themselves are models of lucid clarity, as far removed from madness as Emma Lazarus is from Lou Dobbs.

The best way to proceed through the show is to note each title, ignore the accompanying text, and take in the image. Once you've absorbed the picture, go back and read Wilkes's words if you like. But his prose is so charged - and directive - that reading before looking threatens to make his experience of the scene yours. That experience seems so powerful, even proprietary, that it shuts off other approaches to these images. Ellis Island looms so large in our history because it was a port of entry. What makes Wilkes's renderings of Ellis Island overwhelming is that they become a point of departure.

Snapshots

The Griffin has two smaller exhibitions showing concurrently with the Wilkes.

"The Portrait Collages: Photographs by Paula Gillen" (there are 16) disjointedly plays with scale and perspective, showing the same sitter from different angles and distances. The pieces are like a hybrid of David Hockney's Polaroid work and Stephen Kroninger's collage illustrations, if nowhere near as notable as either.

"Running Through the Wind: Photographs by Frank Rothe" reconsiders an episode in the photographer's boyhood that didn't happen. A native of the former East Germany, he was supposed to go to a Soviet summer camp in 1984 but his name got left off the list of campers. Two decades later, camera in tow, he finally made it there. The 20 color images blend fondness and consternation. Their small size, 8 inches by 6 inches, gives a sense of unemphatic intimacy. Rothe somehow manages to triangulate what-might-have-been (his experience there), what-is (the kids' experience), and what-will-be (as one day the kids will be their own Frank Rothe, looking back). The light is soft, but not nostalgia-soft. Instead, its slight dullness conveys a sort of vexed wonder: This is the happiness I might have had, except now it doesn't look so happy! ■