

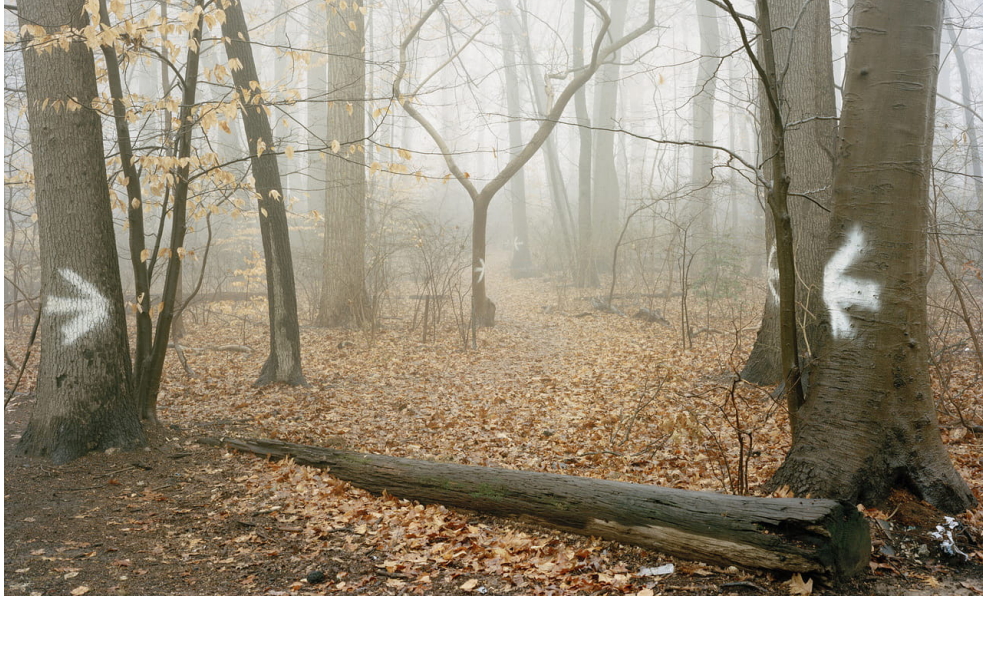


MARTIN BUDAY: PROPHETIC KINGDOM

Essay by Elisa Wouk Almino

The Never-ending Search by Elisa Wouk Almino

Martin Buday’s photographs keep us searching—each image is an incomplete story. White arrows painted on the barks of trees point toward an impenetrable fog. In another frame, we are pressed up against a shut door, presumably someone’s house, greeted only by a drawing of Jesus taped above the lock. Most photos have no people in them. Some are settings that we imagine were once lively, like picnic tables on manicured grass, arranged before brightly painted houses. Other times we are plunged into landscapes that have no beginning or end: a desert, a field of pink and yellow flowers, a placid lagoon.



Buday has compared his photos to Wim Wenders’ 1984 movie *Paris, Texas*—how they both use color to create a mood. I see this, too: the way saturated hues (lime greens, hot oranges, deep reds) make everything more beautiful and lonelier at once. But what immediately came to mind when Buday first mentioned *Paris, Texas* to me was the movie’s opening scene, in which Travis, the protagonist, wanders the desert, an empty expanse ahead of him. “You mind telling me where you’re headed to, Trev?” his brother eventually asks. “What’s out there?” Travis, like us here, is not searching for something specific, but is perhaps waiting for that something to reveal itself.



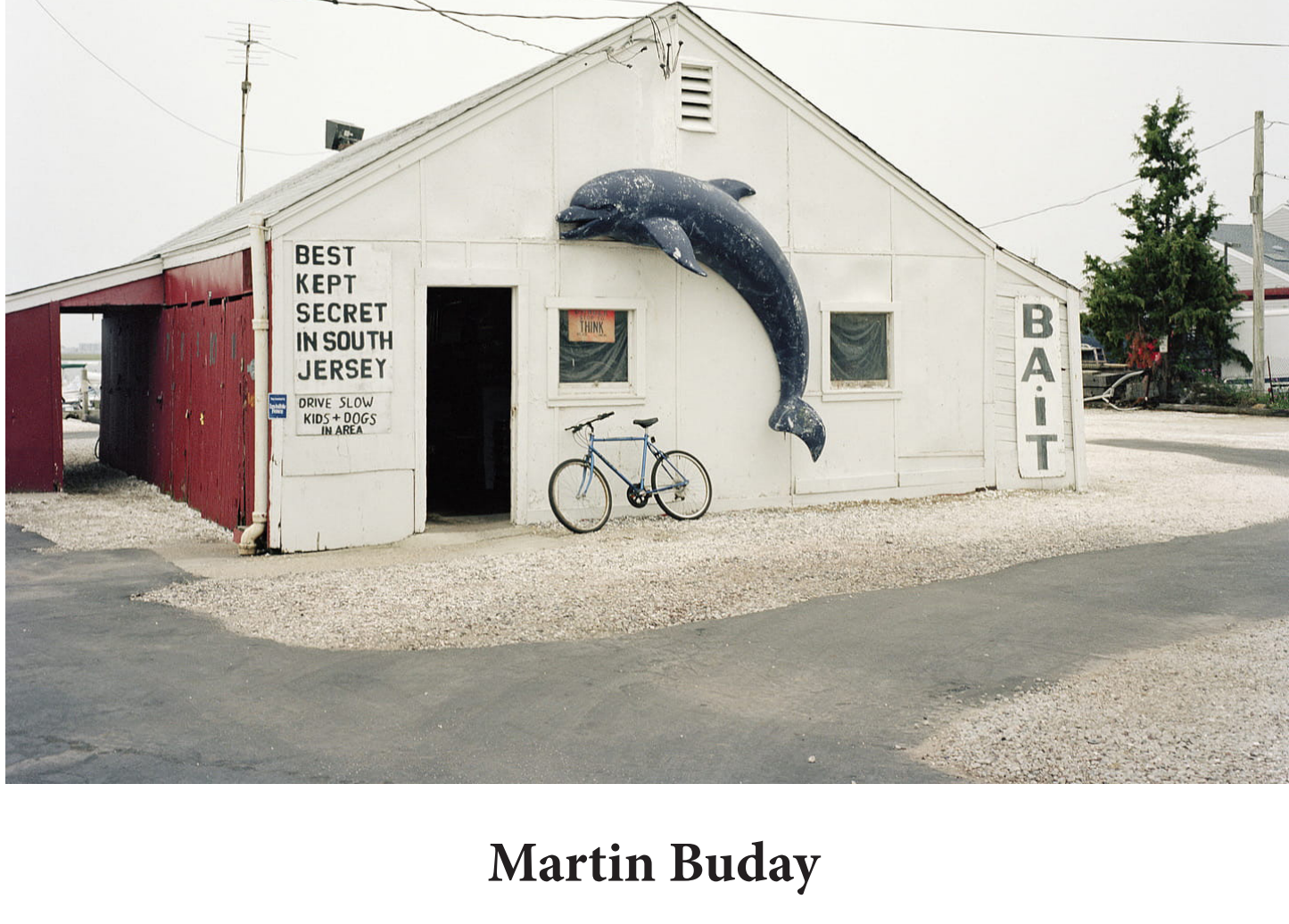
In Buday’s photographs, we travel from Pennsylvania to Georgia to Colorado. It often feels like we’re pausing on the side of the road, catching a moment that would have otherwise been dismissed: the orange doors of a motel blinding against the snow, the silhouette of a mermaid swimming over a baby blue wall. There might hardly be any people, but we sense them silently and tenderly speaking to one another other, whether through vibrant signs placed outside stores or objects on display in private windowsills, like a sculpture of a cat poking out its tongue. A pair of empty chairs on the sidewalk invites our company, as does the hotel painted like a multicolored candy cane. They are evidence of the caring and peculiar ways in which we build and decorate our environments—of how we’re all just trying to get across to one another.



There is something vulnerable about Buday’s subjects, as though we caught them off-guard, as though they didn’t intend to be seen so intently. I’m thinking of the crashed, upside-down pink car and the discarded mattress patterned with flowers; of the rusting green pole holding up the sign to a convenience store in Savannah. The more we reach toward these objects, the longer we look, something curious happens: the sensation flips and we feel as though they are reaching toward us.



There is one collection of photos, though, that stands out: the ones featuring animals, both real and fabricated ones. There’s the monumental, concrete, wide-eyed elephant stalled in a misty, empty lot, and the caramel pony looking directly at us from behind a fence, on which a sign humorously warns, “Beware of the Dog.” There’s another sculpture of a serene unicorn that looks almost real in the black-and-white canal. And a great egret fixates on a wooden ledge overlooking a desert. Our eyes fix on these animals. Confronted by their stoic and graceful sense of control, we feel to have found what we were looking for.



Martin Buday

Martin Buday (b.1976, Doylestown, PA). Lives and works in Philadelphia, PA. Has a B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh and a M.F.A. from the Savannah College of Art and Design. He has shown in numerous group shows, has contributed to a wide variety of print and online publications and is held in numerous private collections throughout the United States. His first monograph will be published by Daylight Books in the fall 2021.

Elisa Wouk Almino

Elisa Wouk Almino is a senior editor at the online art magazine *Hyperallergic*, editor of *Alice Trumbull Mason: Pioneer of American Abstraction* (Rizzoli, 2020), and translator of *This House* by Ana Martins Marques (Scrambler Books, 2017). Her essays have appeared in the *Paris Review Daily*, *Literary Hub*, *NYR Daily*, *Los Angeles Times*, and other places. She teaches literary translation at UCLA Extension and art writing at Catapult.