



Twin Ghosts: The Haunting Ground

This interview about the vanished World Trade Center with [Geraldine Pontius](#), architect and photographer, and [Eric Darton](#), cultural historian and fiction writer, was conducted via e-mail in January and February, 2002. Editor Patricia Eakins spoke for Frigate.

VIDEO FORUMS ON THE WTC AFTERMATH

"[Forum on the Technical Implications of the World Trade Center Collapses](#)" (Columbia University **School of Engineering**, 11/12/01)

"[World Trade Center Forum](#)" (Columbia **University School of Architecture**, 2/1 - 2/2/02)

Frigate: Eric, with the publication of *Divided We Stand*, you were immediately established as the principal critic of the World Trade Center, yet your [Living Archive web site](#) devoted to WTC arcana, lore, and art has become a mourning destination for those who grieve the loss of the towers. You, Geraldine, have told me that you never cared for the WTC until it had vanished—and presumably you were speaking partly as an [architect](#). Yet your photographs seem richly romantic and now read as lyrical eulogies. Would each of you care to say a word about your evolving relationship with the vanished towers?



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Eric Darton: *Divided We Stand* was published and out for a bit over a year-and-a-half before the towers were leveled. In the immediate aftermath, I pretty much didn't relate to having written a book at all, much less "the" book. I was in ER mode, just dealing with being johnny-on-the-spot for the media and trying to comfort a host of anguished people. Then, the weekend of September 15, I was up the Hudson visiting friends and one of my friends' friends showed up with my book, wanting me to sign it; she said it was the last copy available in Poughkeepsie, and it struck me that I was identified with this book and that something so ephemeral as a few hundred pages wrapped in cardboard had now become the closest thing to a solid object representing the WTC that most folks would ever hold.

In the weeks after, it became clear that, in the unimaginable way of things, a book I had written as a provocation had become a source of comfort and centeredness. So much for authorial intentions. [The Living Archive](#) web site, which

I'd put up a year earlier, seemed to serve that function for even more people, because it seemed to transmit a sense that something was still solid even if we felt the tectonic plates shifting beneath us. I'm cool with that. A text is what readers make of it. But in telling this, I've gone, as they say in the screenwriting world, off spine.

My relationship with these buildings keeps changing even now. When I first began seriously looking at them, I was pretty enraged about the abuses of power that underlay the arrogance of their architecture. Slowly it began to dawn on me that what appeared to be the towers' overbearing nature was actually what the shrinks call "body armor." What I was dealing with were two very troubled, alienated buildings that were, metaphorically, calling out: *we're grotesque, we're awful, we're dangerous and we're in danger*. I couldn't help them, but I could listen to their story. Eventually, as I desperately searched for a book title, I asked the towers: *What are you trying to say?* And they "replied": *Divided We Stand*. That title was a hard sell because it is not "on the nose," but I stuck with it because along the way I'd made a pact with these buildings not to reduce them to a trope. I still have nothing for contempt for those who tried to deproblematize the WTC by aestheticizing it, or, conversely, politely not noticing its monstrosity. It's like applying the "thin is beautiful" aesthetic to someone with anorexia, or else pretending that nothing's wrong at all. Now the buildings have become martyrs and flashpoints for military aggression, and we have a really foolproof set of reasons for not seeing them for what they were, much less examining the culture that produced them.

Looking at Geraldine's images, I'm fascinated with how complex some of them are—especially those taken from the West Side Highway. She uses the atmospherics, the play of multiple diagonals and this subtle framing to get us to see with new eyes what we thought we knew. The towers actually look sort of shivery and vulnerable and de-centered. Like the wallflowers they were. It may be a stretch, but these images reveal a kind of feminine aspect to what were generally seen as hypermasculine structures. There's a yearning to them. They incline themselves with neediness.



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Geraldine Pontius:

What strikes me the most about what Eric has said is the marked difference in perception a non-architect has when viewing buildings. The realization always shocks me out of my little bubble of assumptions and views,

admittedly shaped by **thirty years of thinking** about

buildings, designing them, and living through construction of them. As an example, the [office tower in Baltimore that I designed](#) is now over ten years old. I remember when I loved the design and it looked new and exciting. It added a feeling of solidity to the skyline. The structure is now interpreted by many people in Baltimore as an historic structure (they think it was built in the 1920's because it has a pyramidal roof). In the early 1970's, I watched the Twin Towers rise from lower Manhattan, and I was horrified and fascinated by them. They were an engineering triumph. I didn't see them as icons of power until much, much later. They were always described as ugly, but at that scale the term hardly had a meaning for me.

The photos posted here were taken in November 1977. I was just beginning my career as an architect. Those pictures may look romantic, but in fact I was outside with my camera that day and I just pointed and captured what was there, right in front of me, without editing—the small figure; the large vertical plane of the building face, forming an edge to the river and rest of the country, really; and the Statue of Liberty beyond. The haze was caused by blowing sand used to construct land from the water's edge. The sand had been pumped up from the river bottom and was used to compact the site to make it ready for construction. What I saw before me was a landscape. All of a piece, not land and buildings and highway separated. For me the building was like a mountain, as a former student described it, "resting constantly above, like Mt. Fuji. We look up to it to check the weather and find our place in the city."

When the towers fell, I felt as if some vast part of the landscape was suddenly gone. . . like erasing the Grand Canyon, on that scale. The loss of life and the first-hand witness of it on television have upset me all Fall and continue to do so today. As an expatriate New Yorker, my immediate urge was to rush back to help. Now, as I look at my 1977 images [posted here], I am thinking that New York as I know it and remember it exists only in the photos, an archeological site and not a real place. The flower memorials seem more real than the buildings. (I haven't been to the site.)

Darton: Geraldine's November 1977 photos are among the very rare images I've seen that manage to encompass the WTC towers within the framework of a landscape. What makes this compelling is that the WTC was all about not being contextualized—Pelli tried to



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bring the towers into some sort of scale with his World Financial Center design, but he also had to live with the restrictions that the Port Authority had placed on the landfill: that nothing built there would exceed half the height of the WTC. So it wasn't as though there would be another Mount Fuji rising up to challenge it—or rather them—any time soon. From the northwest corner of the Battery Park City esplanade, the WTC almost looked woven into the skyline in terms of scale, but not quite. And then there was the doubleness.

The whole conceit of the WTC, both consciously and unconsciously, was of skyscraper squared, cloned even—the icon of a culture finished, the competition over: hegemony, if not Kingdom, definitively come. As the horrid saying goes: *stick a fork in it—it's done*. So to see the towers in Geraldine's photos as two *friseurs* is really quite extraordinary, particularly today when we are busy building a heroic myth in order to guard against a host of self-generated terrors.

[Go to next page](#)

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