

made

It is common for people to talk about ‘taking’ photographs, as though perhaps the photographs are already there, immanent in the material world, simply awaiting extraction by the photographer. Or perhaps the sense is that they are even stolen from the world by a photographer who bears more resemblance to a thief than an artist. Photographs from this perspective are hunted or collected, then added to the archive of all those images taken, and all those waiting to come. ‘To Take’ implies a swift, grasping gesture, and sometimes this act is attributed, tellingly, to the apparatus itself – it is the camera that ‘takes’ the picture. In one click of the shutter a small fragment of reality is trapped on film inside the dark body of the apparatus itself. An automatism without any real human agency. The image taken from the world.

What might it mean, alternatively, to think about ‘making’ photographs, to consider the photographer less as a hunter or collector, and more as an artist or craftsman? How would this be different, and what might it imply for the way we think about the medium? One thing it alerts us to is the problem of what we include in that act of making – it moves our attention away from the act of pressing a button, the authored act of selection, and directs us towards all those expanded activities that surround that moment: the exploration of a world and the slow process of development of an understanding of the truth you want to convey; the decision making about how and when to take the photograph; perhaps the construction of materials and sets and the assembling of props and models and actors; the development of a closer acquaintance with the apparatus, the camera, the film, the lighting equipment; the processing, development, printing, the post-production, colour balancing, retouching; the decisions about paper, framing, or installation.

There is a complexity to this slow and elaborate process of the manufacturing of a

photograph that is often forgotten in our obsession with the image and our preoccupation with the currency of the virtual. This is a complexity that is located in the very materiality of the photographic process and it underpins the difficulty of making as an activity. In the nineteen eighties and nineties serious photographic practice was transformed by two debates: the first coming out of discussions about postmodernism and the culture of the simulacrum, and the second emerging out of the influence of conceptual art and the irreverent use made by artists of photography to record and document, to archive performances and to represent abstract ideas. One consequence of this twin-pronged assault on the traditions of conventional art photography was that photography became seen in the art world to be primarily about ideas. Its fundamental qualities as a medium – its indexicality, its reproducibility, its archival quality, its performativity - all became harnessed to a variety of fine art based practices which privileged these as conceptual apparatuses for thinking through issues of representation and aesthetics.

What seems important to remember, though, is that photography is also always a material process, not an entirely conceptual one, and it is in the process of making that thinking actually happens. The process by which things in the world, in their mute disinterestedness, can be wrested through the technological interface to become objects that can reveal some kind of truth, is a process that is ultimately vested in a kind of craftsmanship – in close observation, decision-making, adjustment, improvisation, attention to detail, perfectionism – in all those activities and processes that we have devised to mediate our engagement with the material world. Making is, as Richard Sennett has argued, itself a form of thinking, and we need to understand it as such.

The photographic artists in this exhibition are engaged in very diverse types of practice. One makes sculptures and photographs them, another creates a documentary record of place based on linked series of portraits, a third is recreating large tableaus based upon the paintings of Edward Hopper, a fourth records the slow

passage of light across an old stone floor. What is it that holds these different practices together and enables us to call them all photography?

I would argue that they are all essentially interrogating the same issues of process; they all, faced with a camera, are involved in asking fundamental questions about how to use this technological apparatus to reveal a world. Each of these artists is on a different journey, but the fundamental question of how to use this apparatus, to master it, resist it, and even work against it, is the same for all of them.

Alison Bettles *has spent the last two years playing in her domestic environment, making small sculptures out of the detritus left behind by her unruly family. The work has slowly become more confident and ambitious developing into a series of constructed scenarios in which malevolent bedlinen chokes and topples furniture and tablecloths push china to the very teetering edges of tables. Out of the objects of domestic chaos she has created an allegory of incipient disorder that is deeply compelling and scary. These are events made and held in static moments full of trepidation and fear – a conceptualised form of photographic practice that sits absolutely on the boundary between the documentation of sculpture and the pictorial space of painting.*

Lesley Parkinson *is also concerned with the domestic and with furniture and possessions. Her work explores a tradition that stretches back to the earliest photographic practice of Fox Talbot who used his photographs primarily to record, preserve and document his possessions. Photography becomes a container for the object, holding it in place in the archive of culture. Parkinson's photographs of antique belljars contain a series of ornaments that bear witness to our imperial heritage and reveal a uncanny exoticism in the heart of the English home. Through a variety of activities that have an almost Surrealist edge to them: wrapping furniture in cloths, protecting ornaments with carefully constructed tissue bags, polishing the belljar, she alerts us to the strangeness of our preoccupation with the preservation of*

our material history.

***Joan Alexander** and **Alison Stolwood** both make work that explores photography's relationship to time. **Alexander** spends days at a time mapping the travel of light across a room, recording it through rudimentary photographic animations, or tracing the relationship between light and shadow through delicate chalk drawings. A projected transparency of a broom standing against a wall is juxtaposed with a video of dust being swept. Two ways of holding time. Taking a small photograph of a woman in French village washing her windows she manipulates the image to emphasise the play of light and shadow on her body, on the wall of the building, Alexander's own work in making the photograph reinforcing the sense of the woman's work in washing the window, both women concerned with the labour of making a picture, making the world clear.*

***Stolwood** uses similarly subtle interventions. She has made a series of large still life photographs, recording the transitory presence of plants and flowers, and the stages through which a butterfly emerges from a chrysalis. Stolwood carefully constructs her natural environments, encouraging the presence of insects and butterflies and creating a subtle interaction between the camera as a recording device and the the complexity of natural time. Her photographic habitats occupy a strange and delicate space between the scientific processes of close observation and the chaos and entropy of the natural world.*

***Rituparna Dhar** also makes photographs of the natural landscape.. Coming to England from India, a zone of tropical rainforests with a very different climate and history, she is drawn to the mesmeric stillness of the English woodland glade and forest. Through a slow process of piecing together a number of photographs of woodland scenes she creates large panoramic pictures of places that, perhaps because they have been made over time, actually hold that time in suspense. She brings us forests full of paths that peter out, broken stiles, traces of people who have*

past through: dark places where one might become lost

*Photography can also involve the re-making of time in other ways – providing us with a technology that mimics the way in which we store memories, erase them, and often rewrite them. **Christopher Torry** has developed a photographic practice that exists as just such a memory machine. He revisits family photographs from his past that were taken in a garden in which he spent much of his childhood, reworking them to expose the deep structure of memory – the way it crops, erases, fetishises the detail – and the way it stands in front of a reality that will always be strangely inaccessible. Freud's concept of the screen memory, a scene that we remember only because it stands next to a more traumatic one that we have forgotten, is surely the key to the mystery of this work.*

***Greg Stenton** is also concerned with photography's relationship to the archive, using it here to create his own archives of the places in which real people have gone missing. Through painstaking research through police records he has tracked down the places where these people were last seen. His photographs reflect the bland anonymity and relentless materiality of these places. This quality of obstinate presence is in stark contrast to the immateriality of the disappeared person. His dossiers reveal the forensic nature of photography and the way we urge it to reveal clues. Through them he creates an urban landscape that is desolate and disturbing and all too close to home.*

*A more positive version of the urban is created by **Louise Forde**. Her photography emerges out of an engagement with the public world of the street – an itinerant wandering of the backstreets of Brighton, engaging with a world that is far away from any consumerist version of modernity. This is a version of the urban that recognizes its melancholy history and its entropic decay, but also the way in which this provides opportunities for new life to emerge, for improvisation, creativity, what she calls the 'make-do and mend' of life. The people and places she records all exist at this*

creative interface between the past and the future. This is a practice in which the genres of portraiture and landscape are combined through the process of mapping an ecology of the everyday – photography being the place at which the two begin to merge.

*If Forde is interested in photography as a medium of continuity and connectedness **Luke Hamblin** is interested in the way in which it enables us to dissect the world and pull it apart. For Hamblin making photographic pictures is about assembling a cast of characters, analysing their poses, placing them in the pictureframe. Taking as a starting point Edward Hopper's paintings of lonely urban streets and hotel rooms, Hamblin has developed a complex process of picture-making, identifying urban sites, working with his 'actors', and with them collaboratively exploring the role of fantasy in our engagement with 'place' in the modern world. His series of large portraits of his cast encourage us to think about how simple aspects of pose and gesture can embody whole narrative worlds.*

***Toros Mutlu's** photographs of Brighton Marina engage with a very different way of representing space through a photographic practice. Mutlu is fascinated with the heterotopic nature of space, the way in which certain sites might provide spaces within which different worlds collide and intersect. The Brighton Marina wall, a sea defence, a boundary line between the public space of the town and the private yachting marina within, and a place which people use recreationally to walk and to go fishing, is just such a site. Through treating the space as a receptacle for a number of found objects – fishermen's bags, signs, plastic bags, chains, the splash of a seagull's droppings, he reveals the way in which the space writes itself and reveals its own complex social tensions to the world.*

*Complexity is at the heart of **Paul Munson's** photographic series Korean Spring. In a series of coolly poised images he traces the lineaments of a very particular journey*

through South Korea, an attempt to capture a distinct sense of space and time. Each of these subtle, almost abstract images, traces the moment of a particular photographic encounter, a brush with reality: they have a performative aspect to them. Assembled together though they operate on another register too, producing a delicate almost allegorical tracery across the visual field that begins to give us a sense of a society in which nature, technology and the everyday are bound together in a very specific way.

It is clear that each of these photographers has had to make difficult and entirely individual decisions about how they are going to occupy the space of photography, and how they are going to use the technology as a tool for thinking. All of these pictures are beautifully crafted: we recognize the significance of photography's materiality, but we also have to recognize that there is no simple way of talking about photographic representation. Above all we have also learned that this technology is an open-ended tool with many unexplored possibilities embedded within it. If it comes with instructions we have to ignore them or even throw them away.

Joanna Lowry, July 2011