

Memories and Melancholia

Like a musical composition, the work of the two artists in this exhibition is produced from the process of selecting individual parts in order to make a whole. According to Gaston Bachelard, “Music’s action is discontinuous; it is our emotional resonance that gives it continuity.”¹ In this way, Laura Lancaster and Katy Woods produce work steeped in the perfume of melancholia, accumulating a quiet drama from the connections we make within the work. Lancaster’s *Watercolour Group* (date?), a shoal of remade black and white found photographs, are scattered liberally onto the gallery wall denoting both the arbitrary nature of the artist’s selection and the capricious composition of family snap shots. Woods collects images, text and video footage and re-presents the material to the viewer, creating a subjective index of the slippages in everyday existence, bringing attention to the minutiae that may ordinarily be overlooked.

I am travelling back to Manchester, a journey so familiar but only through the hasty perspective of my train window. The view is interrupted occasionally by the thick darkness of a tunnel. Woods uses a similar device in her carefully constructed and choreographed digital video montage *Distant Things* (2006). For Woods the process of making her videos is deliberately economic. Starting from found images, drawings and photographs, she converts them into microfilm, the archaic seductive stuff you will find in traditional libraries and archives and which are viewed on the largely obsolete, clunky microfilm readers. With a lit interface like an ancestor of the computer or a light box in a gallery, this contraption transports any material seen through it into the realm of murder mystery research, hunting for some particular information.

Unlike computers, this is sensual stuff. The film is fed into the reader and Woods then manually controls the tempo and duration of the images on the screen. The outmoded and the new are here crystallised by Woods into an unprecedented matrimony, as the manoeuvres are recorded onto digital video. The outcome is hypnotic; a rhythmic parading of still images, creating movement and speed where once it could only be evoked or willed. The snap shots are curiously animated motionless images, and which paradoxically remain even more petrified due to the urgent panning of the microfilm operative searching for something. The disembodied searcher performs the task of both seeking and finding, as the DVD captures these efforts and substitutes the act of looking for/into the act of looking at. Denying the

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Dialectic of Duration*, Manchester: Clinamen Press, 124.

viewer the tactile pleasure and presence of the microfilm reader, Woods removes this outmoded technology from its materiality, in much the same way that late capitalist folk are divorced and extended by our prosthetic accoutrements which come in the form of car's, telephones and ipod's. Through the redoubled attention of a microfilm reader and the digital camera, the found images of the banal and overlooked become objects of enduring fascination. A layering process within the work's construction combines with the swift motion of the microfilm to create a metrical dalliance of signs. These signs garner a melancholy air, a rupturing of the real; a frothy, stormy sea becomes a harbinger of doom to the unsuspecting flora and fauna of the juxtaposed image that follows it.

This sense of drama within the accumulation of unconnected material is played out in Woods' book *I like to repeat some of the strange tales told me, but have already, I am afraid, put a dangerous strain on your patience* 2006. Here she collated stories about animals stretching back from the nineteenth century to the present day. Some of these tales are tragic, others tragic-comic. Advertises for much loved lost and found pets, a thirteen year old catching a thirteen foot tiger shark in his thirteenth world record catch, and two giraffes dying following smoke inhalation at a zoo in Devon. Rather than the search being to find a particular piece of information, Woods' search itself gives way to form the artwork, the narrative finds itself through the search and we discover a narrative through reading a symbolic relationship. The DVD *Cornholme*, 2006, depicts a town in the Calder Valley not far from Hebden Bridge. The activity of daily life has been drained away to near by towns offering the chance of work. Here the post-industrial and picturesque combine in a beautifully decaying landscape. A series of still lingering shots allow movement to come from within the frame, however the only activity comprises billowing clouds, rustling trees, birds and cantering horses fleeing the scene of this seemingly post human ghost town.

Certain moments in our lives beg to be caught on camera, or it is as though we were never there; image is proof of presence. The existence of a photograph is indexical of choices in a life, decisions that led to a photograph being taken at that moment in that place. Photographs are full stops and Lancaster transforms these captured moments, found at charity shops and junk shops, into paintings. A snap shot taken in an instant is elongated through painting, lending time to the subject matter. It is not always known who has taken these photographs. Now surplus to requirements, the mantle of authorship is taken up by Lancaster.

For Lancaster these found photographs, often discarded treasured family archives, are material to sift through, searching for starting points in order to move out and into new terrain. Far from photorealism or the ancient method of trompe-l'oeil, there is often a blurring

or imprecision. She paints painstakingly, sometimes brusquely, depending on her mood. Boredom, contempt for the photograph or a loss of patience with the repetitive act of copying images continuously and methodically, are all variables that influence the works outcome. Rather than representing scenes and objects realistically, Lancaster's ritualistic remaking of photographs represent in themselves a method to deal with an inexplicable reality and lost moments. As Gerhard Richter says of his paintings, he wants to achieve, "pictorial content without sentiment, but I want it as human as possible."² These snap shots and images are not posited as authorial works of art, they lack art school composition; this is what makes them so interesting.

What does remaking photos do to the image? Removing them once more from the moment, they depict takes time, building up meaning like sediment, protracting the gratification of the finished object. Does the rendering in paint of a long forgotten scene somehow reinstate the content, making it organically fixed? *Watercolour group* is without colour, amongst them a white dog, a faceless couple stopping for a moment to pose for the camera, here the use of monochrome puts parentheses around the neutrality of the photographs in their transition to objects. The vivid palette of the canvas *Untitled* leads to a raft of associations floating to the surface, particularly when colour is seen in relation to the monochrome. This snap shot is fleshed out with hyper real colour and energetic brush strokes, and the fluidity of the painting throws the stiff pose of the superhero duo in their back yard into sharp relief. Two young children are stood together, dressed as Batman and Spiderman, captured firstly by the camera shutter and secondly by Lancaster's attentive gaze. The innocence of childhood is cloaked in melancholia, the photograph as a distancing mechanism is remade as painting touched by the artist, returning to the image a human dimension. Like Woods, Lancaster's work ruptures the barriers of the real, marking out a delicate transition between symbolic and imaginary.

The bizarre elements of the Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque are found in both singular paintings *Untitled 2004* and *Untitled (?)* possessing the stylistic charms and subversive power of surrealism. Costumes and masks are adorned in an act of play, but beneath the surface there is something lurking, an inclination that there is more to the content than meets the eye. Strip away the layers of paint and the photographic sense of melancholia remains palpable. Lancaster's delicate unassuming brush marks form a momentary semblance of meaning, shifting our conception of what we are looking at. Associated with the

2. Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

loss and return of an object of desire, melancholia is a contradiction in terms, the palpable loss of something that, in fact was, never possessed.

There is a photograph taken when I am maybe eight in the family garden. It is shadowy but not out of focus, there is a wild garden bird, maybe a starling, stood on my hand. My face belies a certain amount of terror and awe, expecting the bird as suddenly it landed, to fly away. Nobody remembers taking this photo and I have no memory of the incident apart from my memory of the photograph. As fleeting as the bird, the close of the shutter caught the space in between the bird being there and not being there. Both Katy Woods and Laura Lancaster take these moments, fragments of time and anomalies of continuity, protracting them and building up layers of meaning, adding depth to the story of these flat surfaces, found texts and video footage.

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