

Fictions Abound: Subversion, Parody and the Celebration of the Documentary within Contemporary Photographic Practice

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In conjunction with the symposium *Fictions Abound: Subversion, Parody and the Celebration of the Documentary in Current Photographic Practice*, Ffotogallery held an exhibition under the same title, with work at both the Turner House Gallery and the Chapter arts centre (the site of the conference). With this lengthy and self-explanatory title, the exhibition does not require a great deal of introduction, although it should be noted that this is Ffotogallery's first survey exhibition, and probably its most ambitious project to date, in terms of the number of artists contributing and the diversity of work on display.

Despite the works being spread across the two venues, it is intended that they are all read under the same title. That said, the artists at Turner House could be described as using an individual-led narrative/performance concentrating on disguise, and the artists at Chapter as exploring various interpretations of reality within postmodern practice. The size and striking appearances of Faye Claridge and Vibeke Tandberg's works dominate at Turner House. Unfortunately, Claridge's images don't quite live up to the claims that they "reference the audience's willing suspension of disbelief". Her *Murmurs from the Ark* project (the title alludes to the concept of Noah as the first collector), a set of six quixotic tableaux of children wearing plastic animal masks photographed against a jungle backdrop, was made during a short residency at a quirky miniature zoo or city farm. The masks do, however, cause the children to pose with their bodies and the viewer can only guess what their expressions are behind the masks. This may be quite interesting from a psychoanalytical perspective, considering how fluent children are with the relationship between themselves and the camera.

Vibeke Tandberg's life-sized self-portraits titled *Dad*, are an overdue extension to quite a common artists' theme: photographing themselves mimicking or re-enacting the gesture (whilst wearing the clothes) of their parents. The series contains the range of emotions and different faces one might expect from such a project, but at a casual glance, Tandberg's expressions are over-acted and she looks almost retarded. However, these unsettling gestures are in fact the result of a digital conflation between images of herself, and of her father. As well as engaging with gender-roles and social expectations, Tandberg confronts one's anxiety of turning into one's parents. They are highly accomplished and visually audacious.

Opposite Tandberg's work is Owen Logan's much subtler series *Masquerade: Nigeria hits Michael Jackson*. This faux-photojournalistic project documents a masked 'Michael Jackson doppelgänger' on a tour of Nigeria. This work is not actually an affront on the easily mocked pop star, but rather an attempt to draw out a performance from the surrounding Nigerians by placing such a deliberate alien within their culture. This was a similar strategy to Korean artist Nikki S. Lee, who submerges herself within micro-communities (strippers, skateboarders) and imitates their appearance and their gestures. The outcomes of such performances are vernacular photographs made by a member of whichever social group, taken on a domestic camera, complete with date-stamp. Perhaps Lee's method was deliberately reflected upon with the layout of her photographs - hung inconspicuously around the gallery, almost between other artists' work.

Ffotogallery's statement of the work at Chapter - "...where mediation eclipses reality" - describes the compilation perfectly. Most prominent is Gregory Crewdson's widely circulated giant tableaux of fanaticized American life, *Beneath the Roses*. Crewdson works with a 10x8 camera and employs practically an entire film-crew to create his intensely narrative reflections upon the monotonous yet mysterious nature of urban and suburban life. His disquiet pictures are meticulously staged, wonderfully over-lit and deeply compelling. One might expect his images to look like stills from a soap opera, but Crewdson references science fiction more than any other cinematic genre. His scenes always have an open-ended narrative yet are prompted with little random signs (such as the bird on the dressing-table). Seeing these images at their full size in all their glory is a privilege.

Miklos Gaál's work, which has been reproduced in the press, is also welcomed on the gallery wall. These "overview" pictures depict scenes where there are people en masse, taken from a high vantage-point, yet throwing all but a small portion out of focus using the shifting mechanisms of a large-format camera. Speaking at the conference, Gaál modestly described his technique as the result of it being easier to make pictures that were out of focus, but he did admit that he wasn't always capable of selecting exactly what he wanted to be sharp. He also dismissed a comparison of his photographs to images of model sets, an assessment that immediately comes to mind upon contact with these pictures. Although perhaps a little gimmicky, his method does draw the viewer into the event, and directs one towards individuals that were in the un-staged scene, just as Crewdson's staged images draw the viewer into the narratives of others' fictional lives.

Although very different from the other artists at Chapter, by far the most ingenious works were Joan Fontcuberta's photomosaics, *Googlegrams*. Fontcuberta is famous for his 'mockumentaries', but in this work he has chosen to reproduce several iconic images, including the view from Niépce's study window, and, most importantly, the image from Abu Ghraib of Lindsey England holding an Iraqi prisoner on a leash. (The technique suits this image works so well as the mosaic cells mimic jpeg obfuscation.) For these photomosaics, Fontcuberta collected images via Google image searches using keywords relating to the images (which are also printed at the bottom of the photomosaics). Fontcuberta explores the potential of the Internet as a site of collective memory, and this is quite ironic now, in light of Google's recent deal with China. A mosaic of the image of Tiananmen Square would have been so poignant.

Although attending the *Fictions Abound* conference provided a deeper comprehension of some of the works thanks to presentations by a few of the artists themselves, it is important to form a critical distance between the conference and this group exhibition. The decision to divide the show thematically provided a very lucid experience for the viewer, as well as being a logical treatment of being spread across two venues. Despite much of the work being previously exhibited, the pieces are quite complementary and are a fine survey of a most important part of contemporary practice.