

Alchemy:

Twelve Contemporary Artists Exploring the Essence of Photography

Reviewed at Purdy Hicks Gallery, London

Published in *HotShoe* no.145, December/January 2007, pp.66 - 67

Although not formally announced until 1839, photography's two main elements, the lens and light-sensitive chemicals, had existed and been applied in different ways much earlier. One could argue that photography, in its current state (that is, essentially centered around the camera) was just one potential avenue of possibility for the combination of the two elements. The full title of this exhibition, and its mission statement - *twelve contemporary artists exploring the essence of photography* - presents a bold and difficult challenge. Practically, this can be explained by the arrangement of its raw materials: time, light and chemistry. But the artists here are of course delving deeper into the heart of the medium, highlighting its potential to reveal and fix a permanent trace of something else, and reminding us of its magical and supernatural quality. This exhibition shows other possibilities of discussing what photography is, when you remove the camera from the process.

Indeed many of the works in this exhibition reference Henry William Fox Talbot's "photogenic drawings" which were published in 1844. Artists have used the photogram - the elementary process taught to all dark room pupils - which produces an image based upon the shape of an object that is placed on the light-sensitive paper.

Perhaps due to the way Talbot articulated his discoveries with language such as "the pencil of nature" and "sun pictures", most of the artists have chosen to represent nature in one form or another. For the sake of the monograph, *Alchemy* is divided into the categories of *nature*, *generation* and *trace*. In fact, with the exception of Vera Lutter's images of Battersea Power Station made with a pin-hole camera,

Karl Martin Holzhäuser's *luminograms* and Nigel Jackson's photograms of glass fruit bowls, all of the artists deal with organic life forms and processes. Edgar Lissel has employed an extremely advanced scientific process which involves the movement and growth of phototropic bacteria to create an image. Similarly, Daro Montag creates images by allowing organic matter to destruct the emulsion on photographic film. His large assembly *K3*, made with decomposing kiwi fruit slices, is extremely vivid and utterly stunning.

Employing the absolute simplest of processes to make work is Roger Ackling, who uses sunlight and a hand-held magnifying glass to painstakingly burn regular patterns into discarded pieces of wood. These understated small strips of wood articulate simply and eloquently the concept of photography as a means of channeling light to leave a permanent trace. They are by definition, photographs.

Ackling's very neat lines are part of another trend in the exhibition; symmetry and regularity. Mathematical theory is important to Nigel Jackson's fruit bowl photograms, as well as to Karl Martin Holzhäuser's *luminograms*, made by a lamp emitting very controlled light from small box that is moved across photographic paper. The movement and amount of light is controlled by a pre-determined formula. The resulting coloured strips of varying tones strongly resemble images of DNA made for genetic fingerprinting.

These themes suggest that the conflict between nature and technology is an underlying thesis within the discourse of photography. Neeta Madahar deals with this dichotomy of the natural world and the ordering of things in the previously exhibited *Cosmoses* photograms (see *Hotshoe* no.141) tackling the seemingly random collection of stars and planets which are actually spaced according to laws of physics and mathematics. The inclusion of works so heavily influenced by scientific process and concepts enforces the notion of the photographer/artist as 'aesthetic scientist', a description that has floated around since the beginning of photography. Susan Derges's suite of still lives entitled *Natural Magic* depicts flasks and other scientific apparatuses in the alchemical process of distilling aqua vitae. The only work here to have been made with a conventional camera, they are not

only extremely beautiful but, due to their delicate lighting against a black backdrop, conjure up images of the wealthy, eccentric, amateur scientist working in an attic or cellar on a highly secretive and consuming project.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, the viewer is encouraged to think of photography's magical and even supernatural qualities and of the photographer as a conjuror or magician. Today, popular debate centres around the veracity of, in particular, digital photographic images. This exhibition serves as a gentle reminder that it was ever made possible to look at exact representations of real things, and that photography was originally received by some with suspicion and apprehension towards its spiritual implications.

Unfortunately it is not possible here to discuss the entire collection in great depth or to mention all of the artists and their works. Indeed, some of the pieces were made some time ago and were not commissioned specifically for this show, they therefore have their own themes which are not necessarily related to other pieces in the exhibition. This, however, does not seem to be problematic, and despite the large number of artists included, it is surprisingly tight and they seem to reach a consensus of what the essence of photography is.