

Richard Page
What We Already Know

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Anyone who has had the opportunity to play with a large-format camera will have noticed, and probably have been extremely vexed by, the difficult nature of correctly focusing the image that falls (upside-down) on the ground-glass plate. This is due to two factors: the necessarily long focal lengths of large-format camera lenses (which have a relatively shallow depth-of-field), and the physical flexibility of the lens mount and the film mount, the positioning of which determines what is in focus, depending on the perspective of the subject to the camera. Correct adjustments should lead to perfectly vertical subjects and pin sharp images every time, however, a growing list of practitioners, including Miklos Gaál, Marc Räder, Olivo Barbieri, Jean-Luc Mylayne and Tom Merilion have exploited these movements (most commonly by tilting the film mount) to throw all but a small selection of the composition out of focus. It is quite understandable that many people see this technique as little more than a gimmick; Gaál himself has been candid enough to admit this and goes on to divulge that his work was the result of not knowing how to operate the camera properly. This visual method leads to two very identifiable visual connotations within these practitioners's work, both of which are also explored within Richard Page's series *What We Already Know*.

This exhibition is a culmination of several years' worth of material, bits of which were included in the Jerwood Award 2004 exhibition and, also in 2004, alongside Andy Lock's series in *Twenty Shadows*. Page is typically drawn to prosaic locations such as office buildings and business parks, and modern suburban houses; places that are very much within the current photographic vogue of generic utilitarian spaces and sites on the peripheries of cities - what Marc Augé would describe as non-places. Needless to say, Page does not reference the actual locations in the photographs.

Page is attempting to impose a sense of malevolence upon these quite ordinary sites, and this is achieved quite effortlessly by these dramatic shifts in focus. It is a simple case of fearing what you can't quite see: what could be lurking in the misty, out-of-focus spots of Page's mise-en-scenes? And also,

paradoxically, by what you can see: the sharp gash through the composition reminds me of my eyes playing tricks on me when I'm walking late at night, my attention being snatched by anything that moves or resembles a human figure. This is even more apparent as like over-tired and paranoid eyes, Page's choice of focal plane or particular object within the image, often seems arbitrary.

In the introductory essay, Mark Bolland places Page amongst the likes of Gregory Crewdon, describing them as "purveyors of suburban spookiness", and cites their visual origins in B-movies and TV crime thrillers (although Page's aesthetic is much more along the lines of the likes of *Prime Suspect* and *Taggart*). One image in particular, *Suburban Exposure #2* (2003), which shows a footpath with two generic, Barratt-style homes in the background and looks like it could back onto a railway embankment, depicts just the sort of place to find a dead body; one can easily imagine the blue and white police tape restricting the access of an, in any case, rarely used public right-of-way.

However, the crimes and dangers that Page is hinting at in this work are not street crime or violent assault, but he is almost suggesting suburbia as a battleground of the War on Terror. The deliberate sense of paranoia within his images is a reflection of our wider, so-called *climate of fear*, which warns us to be on guard of anything at all, perhaps even a car covered by a tarpaulin (*Suburban Exposure #4*), a pay-phone (*The Wrong Location*), or an abandoned computer monitor (*Human Resources #1*). This isn't so ridiculous if we consider how simple objects such as bins, rucksacks and now hair peroxide have become indexical of an enemy that is largely invisible. Whether deliberately or not, the title of the exhibition references Donald Rumsfeld's famously nonsensical news briefing about "known knowns" and "unknown unknowns" regarding US intelligence before the invasion of Iraq (February 2, 2002).

The most obvious reading of these types of images is that the viewer is pressed up against perfect miniature models. Paul Winch-Furness, another graduate of the University of Westminster and also a winner of the Jerwood Photography Award (2006) applied this method to transform areas of Milton Keynes – a town created as a whole – back into the architect's model. This miniaturising effect does enhance a sense of observation and scrutiny which is relevant to Page's work, however, this effect has been seen before and more appropriately, in particular Tom Merilion's aerial photographs of Birmingham, and Marc Räder's series of a gate-house guarded Californian village.

Although Page's technique is not original, and the locations in his images are somewhat clichéd to say the least, I could not help enjoying the series, particularly as his hand-printed duratrans and self-made light-boxes have such a magnificent quality, and one cannot help being a little enchanted by them. Their installation, in terms of individual size and juxtaposition, seems to benefit from being less uniform than usual. It will be interesting to observe whether any practitioner can employ this technique originally, without being suggestive of the model diorama or generic malevolence.