

Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2007

Photographers' Gallery, London

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Now in its eleventh year, the Photographers' Gallery continues to host the annual Photography Prize, which rewards a living photographer of any nationality for their contribution to the medium over the preceding year.

French artist and photojournalist Philippe Chancel (b. 1959) was short-listed for his series *DPRK* (featured in *HotShoe* 145), which was exhibited at Arles last year. Chancel's project confirms the squeaky-clean, propagandist image of North Korea. During Chancel's three chaperoned trips to the country in 2005, he visited public memorials and museums, schools and universities, hotels, and the classic mass displays of totalitarian regimes. Well aware that his access to photograph would be severely restrained, Chancel never purported to give an objective impression of the country: anywhere outside of Pyongyang does not exist in the work and there is no obvious attempt to show the "real life" stories of the people of North Korea. This almost prosaic working approach is accentuated by Chancel's visual strategy, which employs a very linear, centred camera angle which reflects the structured nature of life in North Korea in general: the series is meant to be read as a day-trip to utopia. The images are of course riddled with contradictions and irony, and rendered especially eerie by the omnipresence of icons depicting Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, constantly scrutinising their people. Chancel is one of very few photographers who have been allowed to photograph above the 38th Parallel, and this must be a reason why he has been short-listed for this year's prize; however, the element of icon-worshipping has particular significance to a Western audience which is also addicted to the cult of personality.

In stark contrast to Chancel's glistening colour photographs is Anders Petersen's (b. 1944, Sweden) series *About Gap and St. Etienne* - also exhibited at Arles. Over many years, Petersen has developed a brand of gritty, biographical realism which has an acquired taste, imitated most recently by Jacob Aue Sobol and Paul Kranzler. This series was made during a residency in these two towns in the south of France in 2005. Petersen's modestly-sized black and white prints, almost randomly scattered across the gallery walls mirror the chaos within his images. Figures, despite their actual emotions, appear contorted and in pain.

Individuals pose naked or semi-dressed, sometimes looking bold and proud of their bodies and their scars, and sometimes recoiling away from the camera. Petersen's aggressive yet carefully balanced mix of portraits, pictures of animals and vignettes of these people's lives creates an austere and wretched environment that is anonymous of place and time, where man and beast are indistinguishable.

Fiona Tan's (b.1966, Indonesia) installation contemplates the relationship between our lives and photography with considerably less angst. Presented here are two pieces: *Vox Populi* (Sydney) and *The Changeling*, both of which are taken from the exhibition *Mirror Maker*, shown at Landesgalerie in Linz, Austria, for which Tan has been nominated. Tan works with both video and photography and in particular with found and archival images. *Vox Populi*, which was made for the 2006 Sydney Biennale, consists of hundreds of small framed prints spread across two walls that were taken from family albums in Sydney. It is both an attempt to give a voice to domestic photography and to address the decline of the family album, which has been a side effect of the digital camera. The collection is loosely grouped (there are sunsets, days at the beach, special occasions, road-trips, kids dressing-up) which fluidly merge with one-another. It isn't necessary to get up close and inspect them – we know them all already – and whether or not one feels uncomfortable by delving into another's family album or compelled to do so is the biggest question for the viewer. The irony with this work is that digital photography has made sharing photos much easier and faster and therefore more habitual. Opposite these walls is *The Changeling* which consists of two small screens: one with a static, standardised school portrait, and the other with two hundred different portraits of anonymous Japanese schoolgirls from the 1920s, which change every few seconds. This installation is accompanied by a monologue soundtrack performed by Fiona Shaw, which imagines one of these girls as an older woman, reflecting on her mother and grandmother. The juxtaposition of these two works provides a contrast between the informal family snapshot and the rigid institutional portrait. They give the viewer a rough guide to Tan's oeuvre, although it is impossible to grasp the implications of the original exhibition *Mirror Maker* here, or indeed in the catalogue.

In keeping with the Photographers' Gallery's love affair with the archive is Walid Raad/The Atlas Group with *The Atlas Group*. The Atlas Group is the name given to the keepers of the archive, which collected various forms of

personal and institutional documents of the Lebanese conflicts between 1989 and 2004. The archive – or at least a part of it – was exhibited at the Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin last year. Presented here are two of Raad's own contributions, both of which are inventive interpretations of conflict within a gallery space. The first is six huge black and white photographs, now riddled with scratches, fingerprints, and curious multicoloured blobs, taken from the relative safety of the hills surrounding Beirut in 1982. These are Raad's testimony as a fifteen-year-old boy, awe-struck at the Israeli fighter planes which are reduced in these pictures to little more than specs of dirt. One image of a group of people looking out across the city could be mistaken for spectators at an air-show. There is also a sample of Raad's diligently catalogued collection of bullets and shells. The precise spots where he found them are marked by self-adhesive coloured dots stuck on to black-and-white photographs; the different colours correspond to the various ammunition brands, and hence a record of the twenty-three different countries that contributed arms to both sides of the conflict. These photographs (or perhaps collages) are intensely surreal particularly because of their naïve aesthetic.

Considering the judge's decision last year to reward Robert Adams for his lifetime achievement, it is likely that this year it will be given to Anders Petersen. However, in light of last year's invasion of Lebanon, the magnificently surreal quality of *The Atlas Group* and its function as an antidote to the discourse on presenting images of conflict taken by Western photographers for a Western audience in the gallery space, this is one archival project that is well worth crediting.