

A Certain Slant of Light

Personal issues are an integral part of my work since they have almost invariably been the starting points of lines of enquiry that seek to explore both internal states and the visible world simultaneously. In recent years the themes of memory, loss and the consideration of what it is to *inhabit* a body have been my central concern.

One of the underlying themes for the work in this show is the relationship between *presence* and *absence*. It is a poignant motif that is also fundamental to the medium employed. Photography deals with the stilled-live moment, embodying fleeting yet perpetual presence, while equally denoting loss and enduring absence. It is in this inherent and irresolvable contradiction that I find the utilisation of the photographic medium, whilst working within this theme, so potent. The image it presents us with, while affirming a particular and persistent corporeality, functions in fact to re-mind us of what has already been lost; a discarded trace of its subject.

I consider the use of photography as a tool for exploration endlessly versatile in scope and exciting in its ability to communicate directly. My chosen *site of engagement* is the place where I can allow the physical trace that the photographic record holds, to meet and interact with expressive, gestural mark-making or some form of tactile involvement. I therefore tend to favour working with processes that allow freedom to interact physically both with the image and within the process itself, in order to develop different qualities in the print and its surface.

For example a large number of images are photographic stills taken from video, sometimes on negative film, at others on polaroid. These can be drawn or scratched onto, opened and collaged, scanned and reprinted, often dipped in wax to give another skin-resonant surface. With the *bromoil* process the photographic image is bleached away entirely and brought back with lithography inks and brushes, a precarious procedure at times, but one allowing a direct, physical and emotional involvement.

The video *So near so far the distance between us* is part of a body of work using dance movement to assist the process of coming to terms with a deep personal loss. The dimensions are deliberately flat and the space confined and claustrophobic; the movements continue in one plane, often repeating alongside a wall, while occasionally they are directed against it. They relate to the yearning to move beyond, combined with the knowledge of that impossibility and the acceptance of death's powerful reality. From this piece, six images *Transitions* were made, which explore the sequencing of multiple images and a narrative of endlessly still-ed, held moments of presence and loss.

I continued this theme and the practice of taking stills from a moving flow of video imagery with the **Obsession** images (originally a set of 18). Now the space has a three dimensionality, with the suggestion of a door and an open window though still confined in a mirror image. The figures feel isolated, lost even, yet have a sense of belonging; alone, yet facing the viewer as if requiring witness. They contain a feeling of searching, loss, resignation and acceptance, distance, presence, striving and dissolving. (These images were made as *bromoil* prints, an uneasy marriage of working with incompatible materials - namely wet paper and oily lithographic ink – but nevertheless offering a narrow opportunity to tangibly inscribe within the photographic trace).

Moving on from the empty wall and then a confined room, I decided to extend my enquiry further into the body of the house I occupied, to examine the boundaries of a kinaesthetic sense of *presence* within a lived domestic environment. This was an exploration of how *self-as-other* with its emotional and physical memories and desire for expression and relationship, interacts with a domestic space that contains its own associative memory and affective influences.

Using experiential movement and dance I wanted to investigate a sense of *wearing* the space around me as if it were a form of covering. I wanted to explore the erosion that takes place between a *dweller* and its *home* (like a bird in a nest or a snail in its shell) and set myself the following enquiry to consider -

Imagine you are moving around your home space with eyes closed. How does your body 'remember' where it is and how do you experience those memories on an emotional and sensory level? How have you affected the space and objects in it over time and how have they in turn affected you? Where do you store these memories?

If your body, with its own memory of 'home', could speak of its relationship with your environment, how would it express itself in movement and how could your surroundings, with its own history, speak through your body in relationship?

How do we inhabit our bodies and experience our domestic environments? What imagery might begin to express this proprioceptive sense?

Again I used a video camera to act as *witness* in this work as well as a polaroid camera. I also explored gestural mark making within the photographic images using SX-70 polaroid film (which allowed some surface manipulation) to make stills from the moving imagery, as well as stripping open the polaroids and sometimes contacting them together. The images titled **Echoes**, hold these impressions of overlay – layerings of life – and are suggestive of fluid temporal moments of presence and absence, transitional states moving *from* or *into*.

In the piece **Flutterings**, created in parallel with the photographic images, small graphite 'rubblings' of familiar edges and surfaces in my surroundings were made, to

explore a delicate yet relentless, daily erosion through touch and contact. I coated the imagery in wax because of its association with a skin or membrane-like quality, to give the paper a more three-dimensional feel (as object) as well as a certain translucent quality. These traces of momentary contact, like records of abrasion, were then assembled and fixed, held down by pins (reminiscent of the archiving of dead butterflies) and again functioning, like the photograph, as a reminder of the lived moment, stilled for ever.

The video installation that accompanies these images is an edit of three layers of video recording. It plays quietly and faintly. The layers move through and across each other in a continuous and relentless way. A central figure progresses through endless cycles of gesture and motion. A hand appears and invites us to move into the space even as it feels its way with some uncertainty or sinks gently into oblivion. Objects, corners, edges - the actuality of the minutiae of daily living- appear vividly as events or with the ephemerality of a dream, then merge, reappear and sink away again in a perpetual cycle of sustained yet transient attendance. Together they remind of the enduring relationship of an occupier's presence within a lived domestic space. The music that is playing with the projection accompanied the making of this work throughout.

Finally, the piece of work titled ***There's a certain Slant of light*** and the five accompanying framed sets of 12 images titled ***What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands*** return to the theme of presence and absence once more.

The first piece (five bromoil prints framed together) shows images of a seated, elderly woman undergoing a moment of transformation/diminishment. It was made in response to the realisation that my mother had started on a difficult journey of visible disintegration through dementia towards death a few years later and I titled it from the poem by Emily Dickinson that seemed to encapsulate moments of that transient yet painful experience:

*There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –*

*Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –*

*None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the air –*

*When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –*

The process of mental *erosion*, gradual memory loss and shifts in brain function are daily occurrences under any circumstances – we grow older. We age moment by moment imperceptively, in journeys towards our personal deaths. The second series of images (***What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands***) echoes the five previous images, though with composites of 12, each exploring parallel stages, but as if experienced by the person undergoing them. They deal again with the process of erosion and change as it plays out as we age. In particular the small daily moments that make up our habits and the actions of our lives as we live them, the constantly shifting dance of repetition, holding on, surrender and loss. (The title takes the first line of T. S. Eliot's poem ***Marina*** which touches on the sense of confusion, loss, dissociation from one's environment and the consequent dissolution of personality that are distinctive features of dementia.)

My enquiry continues into such spaces as the indeterminate moment between actions; the awareness of the moment present and past; the confusion of things remembered vividly or as a dream; the search for the significant moment and the attempt to make meaning.

Belinda Whiting. 2011