

Exhibition Review: The Photographic Object

April 27, 2009 by: Jocelyn Bailey

The new headline exhibition at the Photographers Gallery, 'The Photographic Object' looks pretty, but there's not much beneath the surface.



Catherine Yass Damage (canal), 2005. Courtesy the artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

There are few surprises here: the exhibition features artists for whom the photograph in its natural form isn't enough. The photo itself, and not the subject of the picture, is the artist's object. This often seems to involve subverting, distorting or destroying. Catherine Yass degrades her photos according to their subject – submerging images of water in puddles and drains, burning photos of gas towers. Maurizio Anzeri stitches colourful radiating patterns onto faces from old family albums, giving them a Rorschach quality. I saw mainly exotic birds.



Priscilla, 1940 – 2008, from the series Second Hand Portrait © Maurizio Anzeri

Gerhard Richter, as he has been doing for 20 years now, paints over his photographs. This occasionally results in some interesting juxtapositions, but mainly it's just a little bit vexing that you can't see the full image. In all cases the treatment of the photo nullifies the content. Which does make one wonder what, perhaps, is the point?

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Rattachement (lightning) © Vanessa Billy

Vanessa Billy's exhibition, revealing her obsession with surfaces, nicely complements 'The Photographic Object'. She presents – undeniably elegantly – a selection of autonomous but interlinking 3D objects, but denies the viewer a 3D experience by roping them off. So they are effectively framed as images. These experiments in redefining space also lead her into collaging photographic material (above). But again, the work is concerned with surface and perception of space – there is little deeper meaning beyond.

However, another premiering installation in the same gallery - [Jordan Baseman's](#) 'Dark is the Night' - investigates its subject matter thoughtfully and comprehensively, and is consequently much more engaging. The thread that connects the three short films, which take the form of highly edited and restructured interviews (Baseman off-camera and inaudible) is Soho. Each interviewee is either an inhabitant of the area, or someone for whom it has a particular relevance. As the Photographer's Gallery has recently relocated to the borders of Soho, this seems an appropriate subject for a commission, and lends immediacy to the stories of the three subjects.



Production still from dark is the night, 2009 © Jordan Baseman/ Courtesy Matt's Gallery, London

Baseman, or rather his talking heads, all draw on Soho's seedy reputation in their narratives. To an innocent young thing like myself, its ambiguous history gives the area a strange mystery. Aside from having noticed the odd sex shop, I have no idea how much of its heritage of hidden brothels and dens of iniquity actually remain. The testimony of Lucy the transvestite prostitute is an eye-opener.

The artist and writer Sebastian Horsley, in a string of Wildian witticisms, depicts Soho as a place where one can see 'society in the act of committing suicide', a place for people who don't belong anywhere, 'people who have no family'. This is seemingly the basis of its appeal for himself. One wonders though, whether the Soho that he loves has finally now been eclipsed by the invasion of upmarket restaurants, chic boutiques and tourists – just as the eccentric dandy-ism he stereotypes is a sadly dying breed.



Production still from dark is the night, 2009 © Jordan Baseman/ Courtesy Matt's Gallery, London

The one thing Soho clearly still is, the hub of gay nightlife in London, is the backdrop for Alan Wakeman's narrative. Although he never names Soho, its exuberant liberation is the unmentioned comparison in his tale of a first sexual

encounter in an age when homosexuality was illegal. His relatively youthful-sounding voice highlights the proximity of those years of gay repression in this country.

Baseman says of his work that he never really knows what he's looking for until he's found it. These three pieces however, flow together beautifully. As a body of work they not only illuminate the peculiar undercurrents and history of Soho, but also the wildly different ways in which we all interpret the same city.

The Photographic Object and Dark is the Night, both 24 April – 14 June 2009

The Photographers' Gallery

16 – 18 Ramillies St, W1

Admission Free

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