

They're Not Laughing Now

"They laughed when I said I was going to be a comedian. They're not laughing now." Bob Monkhouse.

Review by Joe Fearn.

Exhibition by photographers at F-ish Art Gallery, America Ground, Hastings.
9th Oct-21st Nov. 2010.



Nine photographers, all coincidentally based in the Hastings area, are featured in an exhibition at F-ish Art Gallery as part of the 2010 Photo Biennale.

The title of the exhibition 'They're not laughing now' is being used not only as a metaphor for, but also as an evocation of, the act of photography, concerning not just the photographic subject, but its effect on the viewer, and the contribution made by the

perceiver. The fact that Monkhouse probably did not originally mean the statement to be humorous, reflects the way in which photography cannot be just about itself, but is rather a dynamic, reacting with both the observed and the observer. This is to recognise not only that the content of the scene is given in the photograph, but also the way in which the observer shapes and forms that content. The interaction between the affecting and the affected, i.e. 'the seeing' has changed the seer. The changes brought about by this interaction are as unpredictable as 'getting' the joke, if indeed one was intended. The photographer may intend the viewer to come to perceive the photograph in a certain way, after due deliberation, but ultimately they may either see it or not. It is possible for a viewer to discern rightly many aspects of a photograph, correctly identify salient features, but never anything goes. Photography is a rapidly changing journey carrying along both photographer and viewer, and thereby photography itself. 'They're not laughing now' is a snapshot of current practice and a celebration of personal journeys in photography.

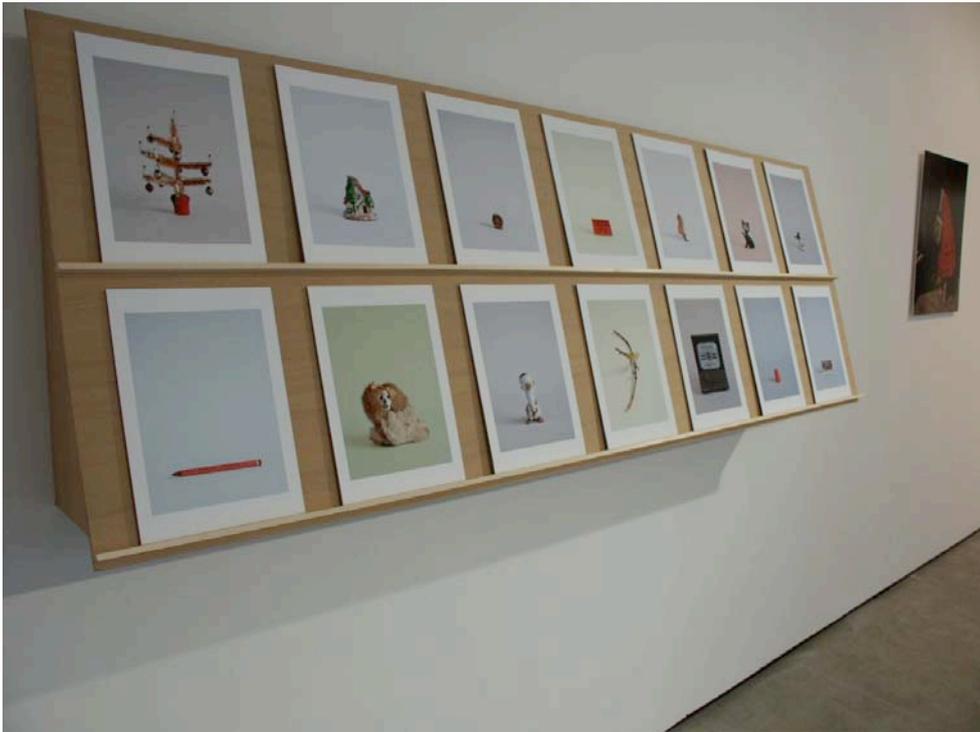
First up as you walk through the door, is Vicky Wetherill's piece entitled Gravity. She has photographed women 'of a certain age' on the streets of the most exclusive (and expensive) walkways of Paris. The photographer's intention is obvious enough, she attempts to capture her subject's vulnerability, the frailty underneath the glitz and glamour, uncovered in unguarded moments. These women are not the pert beauties in slickly made T.V. adverts, but still strive to achieve a certain *sang fra*, an elegance, to offset the inevitable passage of time. The phenomenological part of experiencing these photographs, i.e. the way the viewer is affected, leads ultimately to a change in what is going on. The photographer's intention may be upset (though not necessarily corrupted) by the viewer's reading of the photograph. Some viewers, of different ages for example, may see the photos in different ways. These extraordinary photographs of women totally oblivious of the photographic process, capture profoundly the psyche of women trying to fend off the ravages of time, piercing the armour of *haute couture* in an unselfconscious moment. Perhaps the stripping away of illusion is undignified, even cruel, deserving compassion, or perhaps it just ultimately reveals what is the case; a life that is never actually lived.

On the next wall are photographs by Nigel Green. He has photographed some personal objects from his childhood, some recently found but long forgotten, and others that bring to mind vague memories. The objects raise questions, he says, about memory, possessions, and ultimately meaning. The objects are photographed in a neutral light, and are viewed slightly from above, without -or specifically denied- a narration, just confronted frontally and completely objectively. This suggests he wants the viewer to confront these childish objects as an adult, and to simply look at them. Such a viewpoint is almost *sub specie eternitatis*, though definitely not a view from nowhere, since Green has estranged the objects from any usual environment they once had, and introduced a background colour, to give each object its own particular space. The background is not a neutral one, however. As he explains,

"On one hand this was to break up the uniformity of the consistent format but more significantly was the idea that the colour represented a subjective response to each object. The idea I had in mind was that memories are often associated with colour or a specific quality of light and as these objects were often on the cusp of my memory I wanted the colour to reflect this liminal status."

It could be argued that by placing these objects just so, and in a certain light and colour,

Green has attempted to change them, and thereby actively intervened in his own past. He does indeed admit to a dialogue between himself and his past, giving the objects a second life, and himself a second chance of accessing his past. The viewer may thoughtfully imagine their own personal objects being given the same treatment. What would they be?



On the left wall is the work of Andrew Catlin. His imagery could be considered as a study on perception. The large piece picturing scenes from the Eurotunnel is a striking work, reminiscent of the video game 'Doom' with its mechanical doors waiting to be opened by the player, working an avatar in order to access all areas. There is, in the 'matrix' of sections, a potential narrative, a possible story, yet any possible reading has no route to follow, because the stills have no specific timeframe as a linear reference point. This seems to suggest a sequence of autonomous sections, yet the viewer cannot help but desire a correlation between the frames, in an attempt to see a pattern. Yet another way of seeing the photographic image is as a collection of individual stills, and the viewer may concentrate on just the one. If understanding the photograph is about putting a correct reading on it, Catlin offers us different reading strategies, simultaneously serving many related goals. Do the images depict patterns? Or are they individual stills? Or perhaps, if we could 'untie' them and lay them end-to-end, would they reveal an unfolding story? The viewer gets drawn into an active role, trying to solve a riddle, or contemplate a puzzle, or find a narrative. The figure in the stills has or has not a role to play, he opens the doors and appears here and there, or perhaps does nothing. If we found one still in the road, the narrative would be gone, yet here we have the complete composition, but it still escapes us. Each still is specific, indexical, pointing to its existence, like the words 'the' or 'it' or 'man' or 'here', not saying how something exists, but only that it does exist. Other photographs follow a similar pattern, a rhythm, inviting us to believe an impossible perspective of paths supported by columns, trodden by people in some imagined public building, one atop the other. The photographs trigger the viewer's imagination, they have a certain rhythm, like a story read out syllable by syllable.

Martin Everett extends the exposure time of a light sensitive vivid colour film (between 4 and 8 minutes) taken with a rangefinder medium format camera, and displays the resulting

photographs in lightboxes, illuminated from behind. One of the effects of this process is the way the image seems to float, gaining an aura from the diffusion of the colour that is already spread by the long exposure time. The subject matter adds to the aura, Everett has placed his cameras inside a museum which contains an entrance to the original Islamic city. The very act gives an impression of the eye watching the eye; camera, museum, entrance, 'observe' each other, before ultimately the viewer sees the final result. The mechanics of his photography is interesting in itself, so is the subject matter, but it's the result that grabs the attention, as Everett says,

“We may think of ourselves as observers, but are we actually seeing?”

The result is a photographic experience with an eerie quality, the image appearing to have a 'foot in each camp' of our consciousness and the external world, dreamlike, depicting something illusive but nevertheless from somewhere specific; imagy, but not imaginary.



Turn the corner and the viewer finds segmented snapshots of a woman taken from a computer screen as she talks to the photographer through Skype. Nazarin Montag observes and comments on visual information exchange as mediated on the Internet. It is commonplace for electronic devices to deconstruct and recompose a person's physical image, making a real person seem virtual. Nazarin's method is to point her camera at the computer screen and spontaneously take pictures of her friend to illustrate

“How easily we accept abstracted images as a replacement of the real subject”.

The computer-generated image is familiar enough for us to confuse it with a computer-mediated image of a real person, and Skype's images, with its subsets of frames and the nature of time delays that occur in the process, can seem like putting flesh on Max Headroom. As if this wasn't enough to subvert our veridical experience, 'seeing what we

believe and believing what we see' Nazarin's photographs offer a further alteration, since a photograph is a reproduction itself, a digital image mediating reality into a coded image. So Nazarin's photographs further abstract the image from its physical subject. This differentiated image feeds back into our preconceptions of reality, of what we are willing to accept. Nazarin is communicating her concern through a medium that offers tangible 'sense data' that the viewer accepts at face value, i.e. for how it looks. Montag's concern is that these images will become part of 'the furniture of the world' informing our conceptual scheme, by which we judge future images. Montag's photographic images seem to argue for a warning, namely that we should recognize that just because something (an image, say) is correctly (undistortedly) mediated by something digital, that does not entail it to be correctly predicated of something digital. To think the former entails the latter would be going too far of course, but judged purely on a phenomenological basis, as Vassilis Kantas points out

"Skype's images seem to argue 'My friend is like this, because this is how it looks'".¹



Stuart Griffiths and Amanda Jobson share a slide installation entitled 'The Stade'. It features a selection of photographs of the Stade fishing grounds in Hastings old town, taken over a two year period. F-ish Gallery have the good fortune to be exhibiting work by Griffiths, who was the outright winner of the 2010 Biennale. The two photographers have cooperated to produce a documentary style representation, with somewhat passive, objective, descriptive angles, combined with vital expressive close-up. The slideshow serves not only as a historical documentation, containing a social narrative, but also as a personal expression of a historical place soon to be radically changed by the building of the Jerwood Gallery. The uncertainty is expressed in still images, some showing the now

¹ Kantos, Vasileios. 'Hastings Photographicus' in They're Not Laughing Now Blurb.com. P.75.

defunct posters shouting 'No to Jerwood on the Stade'. The stills subtly display the angst brought about by the rapid transition from a place dedicated to activities related to the fishing industry, to a cultural centre for art, which may prove an uneasy transformation. The photographers have situated themselves and their camera in a habitat pregnant with meaning, an environment where something is about to be said.

Bruce Rae experiments with big format wooden cameras, exposing negative film which he goes on to produce paper prints. The paper has been immersed in gelatin and salt, then dried, then coated with silver nitrate and citric acid.² Finally, this paper is put in contact with the negative film and is exposed to sunlight. Robin Muir, Vogue Magazine picture librarian, referring to Rae's salt prints commented

"This early Victorian process, all but banished into history, has its roots in the earliest days of photography. A difficult one to master, Rae's pursuit of perfection allows for a low success rate; only a quarter of prints produced will convince him to sign and add them to his editions."³

The most obvious manifestation of this painstaking art, are gorgeous photographs, containing rich tones and a sparkling texture, that give the photographs a tactile aura, making the viewer want to feel them, acting as a bridge between senses, like a novel that has first been felt in Braille. Rae is not concerned with a museum-like display of classifying or describing. Rather, he chooses objects with similar texture, two shells, or a shredded snakeskin and a fabric, to produce an image with a startling visceral quality of texture.

Alexander Brattell's photographs are in black and white, though not starkly so. Wittgenstein once insisted that 'a proposition is a picture of reality'⁴ and Brattell's photographs may be said to reveal states of affairs, in a world that is 'everything that is the case'.⁵ However, we may realize that some words, though small, contain a dictionary of nuance,⁶ and so it is with Brattell's images, they speak for the world, without necessarily revealing that world. Just as Rae's photographs of flowers cannot be said to be about gardening, Brattell's photograph of a workman in a hole is not about production or labour. These pictures 'picture' possibilities, and draw the viewer's attention to what might be there.

² Kantos, Vasileios. 'Hastings Photographicus' in They're Not Laughing Now Blurb.com (2010) Pp 75-76.

³ Muir, Robin. Quoted in Rae, Bruce. Silvered Surfaces Independent Photographers Gallery Press.(2006)P.1.

⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Tractatus logico Philosophicus. Routledge Press. (1980)P.1

⁵ Ibid. P.1.

⁶ For example see Rushdie, Salman. Shame Random House Trade Paperbacks (March 11, 2008)

The concept of *sharam* underlies this complex and quietly compelling novel. *Sharam* translates inadequately into English as "shame" but it encompasses nuances such as "embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness in the world, and other dialects of emotion for which English has no counterparts.

Running until _21st November 2010

Thursday-Saturday 11am/5pm, Sunday 12pm/4pm or by appointment.

Curators talk 6_9pm 28th October 2010

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