



MOMENTS OF REPRIEVE: REPRESENTING LOSS IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Paradise Row, London

As impetus or outright theme of an exhibition, it's hard to imagine a field more familiar – less lost, let us say – than 'photography and loss'. I say this as a happy sucker for mourning and melancholy, ruinous mauling and, in formal terms, the eloquent nothing, or near-nothing, of a photographic blank or blur. But even an inveterate loss-monger had to ask what more could be wrung from the rubric curators Louisa Adam and David Birkin had attached to this group show, mounted off-site at the former premises of David Roberts Art Foundation. The portentous title didn't help. Primo Levi's 1978 book *Moments of Reprieve* collects impressions of individuals the author felt some frail human compact with during his time at Auschwitz: a Romanian who smuggled soup to him, a young Hungarian man who gave him a stolen radish. If you're going to invoke that level of historical desperation, your show had better not be using it as a cod-poetic catch-all for all manner and modes of loss.

But that is essentially what 'Moments of Reprieve' proposed, suborning everything from Indre Serpytyte's quiet studies of personal effects – related to her father's mysterious death in Lithuania – to Idris Khan's palimpsests of canonical photography texts into its supremely vague remit. One had to wonder first at Birkin's inclusion of his own work, which typically effects a clunky rapprochement between artistic ego, politically charged imagery and some pretty basic self-consciousness regarding his medium. A dismal, crass for-instance: Birkin has photographed himself performing 'stress positions' from the CIA's torture repertoire. But the problem here was rather one of form: his *Revisited* (2006) is a bruise-hued blur with a dark figure suggested at the centre. The image is composed of re-photographed stills from the last video Birkin took of his brother, Anno, before he died in a car crash aged 20. It's in no way to belittle that loss to say that *Revisited* failed in this context: in part because, like most works in the show, it

was stranded without reference to its origin or related images, but also because it so superficially resembled Khan's adjacent and over-familiar *Every Page ... From Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida* (2004), with its digitally layered pages of text and photographs.

Some of the weakness of 'Moments of Reprieve' was certainly to do with this easy assertion of visual counterparts to actual loss, resulting in some glossy restraint in the face of lightly conceptualized but actually quite terrible content. That is almost a definition, I suppose, of the work of Taryn Simon, whose *Kenneth Waters, Scene of the Crime ...* (2002) refers to a notorious miscarriage of justice in Massachusetts and is quite of a piece with Simon's pretty, and pretty unoriginal, take on the hidden spaces of recent American history.

But thematic overreach and some very thin work aside, the most dispiriting thing about 'Moments of Reprieve' was the impression of good work treated in the most cursory and telegraphic fashion. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *The Day Nobody Died III* (2008) is the abstract, streaked product of time spent embedded with the British Army in Afghanistan. A long strip of photographic paper was exposed to the sun on the first day without casualties during their visit. The resulting photograph, mottled and irradiated-looking, makes no sense reduced to an instance of indeterminate 'loss'. Nor was the show able to compass Jane and Louise Wilson's recent work in Pripyat, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster: *Atomgrad (Nature Abhors a Vacuum)* (2012) shows an indoor swimming pool in a state of ruin, roofing material hanging like appalling globs of organic rot. It's an ambitious project, here cut off from its real engagement with the lives of those affected by the catastrophe, looking instead like just another picturesque ruin.

Perhaps the oddest aspect of this glib show was the impression that one really was looking at some kind of loss, or at least debilitating absence: to wit, the curators' failure to notice that their subject was cruelly passé, their unwillingness or inability to be more precise or more ambitious. Instead, the whole felt half-hearted, hubristic and, well, lost.

BRIAN DILLON



JACK LAVENDER, OLIVER OSBORNE, MARCO PALMIERI

The Approach, London

A welcome mat lay at the centre of The Approach's summer show of works by three young Londoners. In Jack Lavender's *Welcome* (all works 2012), the salutation is printed on material similar to a mouse pad, the muddy gold lettering overlaid on an image of craggy rock and tiled as a four-by-four grid. This cold and forbidding design is quite incompatible with its message. Any resulting discomfort was coyly accented by a plastic mummy's hand resting – fist upright – on its surface. Pattern-printed glass tumblers were also placed there, the kind of novelty kitchenware familiar from the early 1990s, yellow ivy running across some and the Pepsi logo printed on another. Above, a rectangular glass pane dangled from a rope, with short metal prongs somehow welded at the bottom, perforating a cast-metal doughnut. This arrangement was as curiously compelling as an awkward social gathering, all junk food and crass joviality.

Lavender had two wall-mounted hangings here too, where the rusty armatures were welded into large frames, each functioning like a web or net for the kind of cheap decorations you might find in a pound shop. In *Gold Balloon*, for instance, the eponymous object is cast so that it seems to float upwards from the frame. A shoelace hangs down from the top of the same armature and a clean glass plate is lodged at the bottom; a deflated ball, with a face printed on it, flops from the right. A century after Cubism ruptured pictorial space *within* painting, this work acknowledges that two-dimensional representation is a perforated sphere but continues on all the same. *Gold Balloon* is funny in a sad, self-effacing way, but the ensemble is again oddly transfixing.

Oliver Osborne's *Rubber Plant (Empty Fridge)* hung on an adjoining wall. Its subject is painted in detail in oil on linen, delicately lit as if by the moon against a midnight

blue background; the rubbery-ness seems tangible in the density of the leaf, against which the light shines evocatively. Osborne has paid painterly attention to this, which makes the addition of a small digital print – cut and pasted at the centre of the composition – so surprising. Why spoil your captivating *trompe l'oeil* effect, Osborne, with this hasty intervention? The offending print shows two bewildered men staring into an empty fridge. It's sketched in a loose, cartoon style but there are no accompanying captions. Everyone's perplexed.

A clue hung opposite, in another painting by Osborne. A similar print is pasted at the central point at which its six composite panels converge. It shows a rug with a bump in the centre and a tail hanging out, like some brattish cat, but there's a caption this time (also the work's title), 'Jetzt ist Otto unter dem Teppich' (Now Otto is under the rug), revealing the drawing to be an illustration from some anonymous grammar textbook and presumably the same source as Osborne's previous print. Beneath, the six panels are covered in a mottled painting effect of a sky colour that might line a rococo ceiling or appear in a Romantic painting. John Constable once called his clouds 'the chief organ of sentiment' and so it seems that Osborne's combinations are a ploy: pitch one didactic pictorial device against another and see what rebounds. As cloud effect or rubbery leaf are combined with fairly humourless educational illustrations, they demand fresh attention. What do we see when we're not looking, *Jetzt ist Otto unter dem Teppich* might ask – a question that gives these paintings critical purchase.

The two oil on canvas works in Marco Palmieri's diptych, *Twins*, comprise identical sketchy outlines of an upturned Roman head printed on two different backgrounds. One is on watery grey, the other on a horizontal yellow dissolving into blue like a nod towards the hues of Mark Rothko. Their sombre background fuzz is familiar from works by this iconic artist, but also oddly from the basic blurring effects of digital imaging. The icon of a Roman head is over-familiar too, so that its outline seeps in subtly rather than appearing in bold. One assumes Palmieri is attempting to combine his sources in a new kind of painterly abstraction, treating the familiar fog of pictorial colour fades and infinitely reproducible forms with the fluid qualities of paint.

The exhibition was untitled, filed instead after the three artists' names. And while it was a valuable and enjoyable display for all parties, the works slightly suffered from such close proximity to one another. They might all be considered as pictorial assemblages coming after Modernist painting when appropriation strategies abound. However, these categories are loose and rife and provide an insufficient framework for works of particular and sometimes exceptional sensibility.

ISOBEL HARBISON



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MARIE ANGELETTI

Cole, London

A slim black metal rail ran round the walls of Marie Angeletti's debut solo show, 'Mixed Feelings'. Fixed at the midway point, this minimalist dado traversed the boxy ingress where press releases are stacked, crossed the glassed frontage and created a limbo bar blocking the office. Attached, in various configurations – alone, or in pairs and triplets that sometimes felt logical, sometimes didn't – were 13 coolly composed photographs by Angeletti, a recent RCA grad who was selected for 'New Contemporaries' last year. Maybe the steel-framed images were magnetized and easily movable; certainly it seemed as though they could have been pushed like beads on an abacus, reordered like beads on a thread. Given its inconveniencing quality, this wasn't just an eye-catching response to questions of display. What Angeletti wants to foreground, right off the bat, is instability and modularity as they play out within, and between, supposedly indexical images.

Some of hers look found and re-photographed, some don't. One would hazard that, here, editorial documentation of objects for auction and Angeletti's self-shot photos, though part of her work's low-watt vexation is that we don't always know which is which. *Mf 1 VA Jewellery 01, 02 and 03* (all 2012), clustered together in a three-part aerial view of a jewellery display, deploy a sumptuous yet hard, contrasty look whose Avedon-ish tones are suggestive of a 1960s magazine advertisement. On its own, with its elegant wristbands, gilded butterfly brooches, necklaces, bracelets and combs neatly arrayed, it's a bit of a puzzler: a sort of mutely retro take on Christopher Williams. But when the image

beside it, *Mf4, Urara yellow* (2012), features a Japanese girl in red underwear looking melancholically past us, we may start thinking about geishas even though the subject isn't quite inherent in either image. It precipitates softly between them, in a sort of mutual tincturing. (See the show's title.)

From here the exhibition extrapolated, associated and unravelled smoothly. There were more Japanese signifiers and more historical ones. *Mf11, VA s_141* (2012) zooms in on the lower halves of three women in short skirts and heels, holding geometrically patterned leather handbags. *Mf8 Brazaville Coll. 01* and *Mf9, Brazaville Coll. 02* (both 2011) feature the same museum examples of ivory figures, including a squat laughing Buddha, under – somewhat literalist this, perhaps – shifting combinations of pinkish-purple light. *Mf10, Auction Catalogue 01* (2012) stars another figurine, this one a semi-recumbent woman stretching out her arms and holding what appears to be a tambourine; the figure is obscurely contextualized with a lamp, an ersatz spotlight. (Something to do with a graphic design snafu in an auction-house catalogue, it would appear.) Dancers, or performing women, recur in *Mf13, Ballerina* (2012).

If one were looking to tie this work down via iconography (precisely the wrong approach), one might be tempted to see Angeletti as here pursuing a semi-oblique feminist agenda orbiting around performance, role-play, adornment, containment. But she seems more interested in scrambled typologies and the uneasy pleasures of, to quote René Magritte, the treachery of images. If pre-existing, these photographs meant one thing in a catalogue, museum or wherever, and now they signify something else or, intrinsically, nothing at all: detached, rivulets in a larger directional flow. 'Thanks, Internet,' such work murmurs. Like many artists in their twenties, Angeletti wants to denote that presiding context without directly addressing it, performing its knock-on effect on materialist media. From her rail outwards, she does this with professionalized elegance, intelligence, poise and a good sense of pace. At the same time, she speaks what is increasingly a generational language: one of pictorial ambiguity achieved through the juxtaposition of incommensurables; the fluxions of meaning between images that have superficialities in common – and thus provide an organizing structure for thought – and ones that don't. (Several images of plants here, for example, serve as strategic discords.) What one wants to ask – given that we increasingly recognize how this approach operates and our appreciation of such works might increasingly come from a kind of narrowing connoisseurship of embodied slippage – is where this goes next. Angeletti, at the outset of her career, looks savvy enough to seek out answers.

MARTIN HERBERT