

# FREMANTLE PRISON

Text by Christopher Young, 2012

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[Christopher] Young has found means to recover the photograph from the tyranny of the image and its single received meaning. His works are themselves doors, invitations to enter and explore.<sup>1</sup>

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*five* is a series of images, produced in various locations across Perth and Fremantle in Western Australia.

The locations have been kept deliberately anonymous for a variety of reasons; not the least being formal confidentiality agreements with property managers that facilitated greater access to venues and appeased any associated political issues.

The anonymity has allowed the images to become universal and not bound to the history of a specific place. People are more likely to ignore or less likely to be distracted by the historical usage of a building when looking at a series of captionless, ambiguous images.

The first set of images was made in Perth in September 2008 and together with a set made at another Perth location in January 2009, these formed the basis of an exhibition at the Perth Centre for Photography in July 2009, *five – new work by Christopher Young*.

A number of other locations were visited later in 2009 and early 2010. It was around then that I expressed my interest in making a new series of images at Fremantle Prison.

Some of the resulting work, together with existing images from other venues, formed an exhibition at the Queensland Centre for Photography in November 2010.

The Fremantle Prison images were made over a number of occasions and Prison motifs (bars, shackles, gallows, etc) were consciously avoided.

The buildings are particularly appealing as some aspects marry up with the aesthetics and subject matter of other locations.

With that in mind, the resulting images were not made as a portrait of the Prison but were intended to complement the broader series.



In February 2011 Fremantle Prison asked if I might be interested in displaying some of the Prison images alongside a selection of objects from the Prison's collection.

This may seem contradictory to my ideas around 'minimising distraction', naming and exhibiting the images within the Prison itself, however the idea of attempting to show another side of this iconic venue appealed.

As a place where normal processes occurred with protagonists eating, sleeping, working and playing, the Prison could be seen as a concentrated microcosm of the outside world.

Both the image and object selections in the final exhibition focused on various everyday aspects of the Prison.

The traces of normal human activities that occurred within these confines are ultimately what I found compelling.

<sup>1</sup> Bromfield, D.: *Stains*. Published in *drei*, April 2008.

## MARK MAKERS...

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A Prison has a complex social dynamic with amplified concepts of discipline, observation and hierarchy.

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This stressful environment requires stringent controls to maintain order.

A key process of incarceration – as with military service – is the removal or minimisation of identity.

This often involves the use of monotonic uniforms but can also include such things as standards of grooming and the reduction of individuals to numbers.

*I always felt like when they took my clothes and made me put their clothes on... they were taking my identity because they were matching me up with everything else, every other person around me.<sup>2</sup>*

The desire for individuation can be used as a disciplinary tool. Privileges like adorning cells with images can be granted for good behaviour, with the threat of removal corresponding to actions deemed inappropriate.

An individual's uniqueness can then manifest itself through tiny variations on norms. That which appears inconsequential can carry a much greater meaning for those who might be subverting authority or trying to express themselves.

Simple marks, noises or actions can become complex codes. The presence or even absence of objects can take on different meanings and what previously was utilitarian can become highly prized or a form of currency.

*Insignificant actions and gestures could be seen as possibly meaningful.* 'One day, one of those prisoners, looking straight at me ... whistled 'Plaisirs d'Amour.' Was he trying to convey anything?' *A prisoner might torment himself for months, trying to find the 'hidden' meaning in such an experience.<sup>3</sup>*

There are many documented cases where seemingly innocuous marks have been used as a form of communication outside the prison system.

FBI double agent Robert Hanssen used variations on pieces of tape and coloured tacks to communicate with his Russian handlers, and CIA case officer Aldrich Ames used simple chalk marks on a mailbox to do the same.

American hobos developed a system of symbols as a way of covertly communicating information to others. These simple marks seem inconsequential but often contain critical information about a specific area.

This complex coding reflects similar themes in image consumption. What or who is not there? What can we not quite see? How do we overcome the helplessness of not being able to decode what we are looking at?

<sup>2</sup> Coward, N.: *Fremantle Prison Oral History Project: Interview with Noel Coward*. Sound recording. Interviewed by Erica Harvey, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Wagnon, Lt Col Bobby D. USAF: *Communication: The Key Element to Prisoner of War Survival*. Published in *Air University Review*, May–June 1976.

# INVISIBLE INK...

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It may seem an odd thing to say about a visual art form but this body of work, in many ways, was about invisibility and the otherwise unseen.

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For a variety of reasons the interiors of the various locations visited for the project are often deliberately obscured from the public's gaze.

Many are held in a form of stasis, with only minor alterations occurring over prolonged periods of time. Despite the best efforts of those involved, without active preservation and robust research, spaces inevitably degrade.

Meaning is often lost as the distance between the space and its previous protagonists becomes greater.

The value of objects found in a space can be distorted by context (e.g. a tool presented in a sealed glass case rather than being in use.)

That which was previously important can appear insignificant. Equally, other objects can attain greater value through scarcity.

Classic examples of this are the kitchen utensils from Fremantle Prison. When the Prison was decommissioned in November 1991, items that were still in use and/or functional were transferred to other Prisons. These seemingly everyday objects are subsequently rare and unusual in the Fremantle Prison Collection.

Objects also function as cultural symbols, metaphors and reference points. As such, each viewer engages with them on many different levels and with varying levels of complexity.

The object can be at the same time an artwork, a utilitarian vessel, a weapon or an artefact, depending on when and by whom it is encountered.

Ordinary objects do not necessarily arrest our vision so presenting them highlights our dismissive nature and our fascination with freakish exceptions (the car crash) in the viewing experience.

For example, when confronted with an image of a hangman's noose, the viewer struggles to look past the piece of rope. The photograph – as an object – essentially disappears from view. In the eyes of the viewer, the image is more akin to a window than a rendering.

With the ordinary, content (the subject in the image) and form (how the subject is depicted) can more easily blur into each other. Classic examples of this are the images Edward Weston made of such objects as toilets and capsicums.

*Believing in the specialness of what you are photographing is a disaster, then you think the photograph will be good because of what is in it. Cézanne taught me that that is not true. An apple is not very interesting... In the painting he would bring it back to life.<sup>4</sup>*

With this series, objects and scenes were partially obscured, cropped out, or are otherwise ambiguous for a number of reasons. This prevented the image from becoming a simple representation of a very specific object, and instead encourages the viewer to access their wealth of personal experience.

*The richness of the photograph is in fact all that is not there, but that we project or fix onto it.<sup>5</sup>*

The photographer's hand was deliberately as quiet as possible; the images avoid obvious embellishment.

The lack of evidence of the creative process becomes a tool to minimise distraction in the viewing experience.

A simple image of a chair can transcend the typology of 'a chair of a certain style from a certain era in a certain venue' and may instead remind the viewer of a chair that a grandparent or a pet favoured.

Ambiguity can, however, prove problematic. The lack of a caption or clear delineation to direct what someone is looking at can hint to a form of secret language. People can come away from the experience confused and unsure if they have decoded the images 'rightly' or 'wrongly'.

The experience is inherently subjective and a viewer should feel they can not only ask questions of an image and its subject matter, but also of their own response to it. How does this or that make them feel? Does it relate to their own life experience in some way?

*It is the doubt about what is actually being represented, and the deconstruction of what a photograph essentially is and how it functions, that are core to [Jeff Wall's] work and... others of his generation.<sup>6</sup>*

4 Lubow, A.: *The Luminist*. New York Times, February 25, 2007.

5 Morin, E.: *The Cinema or The Imaginary Man* (University of Minnesota Press, 1956/2005).

6 Bright, S.: *Art Photography Now* (Aperture, 2005).