

STAINS

Text by David Bromfield, 2008

Christopher Young is not interested in photography, not, at least, in the media-based art form in which good and bad photographs coincide neatly with good and bad art and one picture is worth a thousand words.

Despite the impressive, painstaking techniques which he deploys in his *drei* series, photography remains, primarily, a means to his artistic ends. He is obsessed with the mysteries of human presence in a world of objects always decaying, the before and after of being, traces of which lurk in every photograph ever made. In nominating two of his large-scale images, side by side, as one work, he challenges both himself and the viewer to establish a single coherent presence in relation to both.

In *drei #04/#05* he chose two from a series of 'excerpts', interior shots of an abandoned medical centre that he had never previously seen. They are both exquisite, balanced minimal compositions with their colours carefully muted save for the turquoise blue plastic chair seat to the right. To that extent they speak to each other. Beyond that, however, there is no visual continuity, no seamless logical space between them.

One angle of vision cancels the other, separate light sources are skewed, over and into both images. These undefined, shifting, almost shapeless volumes leave the eye untethered, free to bump against objects and the traces of those who used them. Switches are to turn, on or off, doors to close or open. The viewer is prompted to an archaeology of presence. Neither narrative nor mystery, it is a matter of what was and what now is. It becomes clear that every object bears the marks of use and aging.

Cream plastic and paint turn brown. The carpet is scuffed and there are chips missing from the paint work at the bottom of the door in the right-hand image. Barely noticeable events stir slightly. The left-hand door is open to the smallest degree possible without being closed. The reflections in the glass cabinet in the right-hand image will soon change forever. Absence grows from presence.

Young is fascinated by the Japanese notion of *wabi sabi* which has informed much of his work. It brings together the idea of a restrained simplicity of form and conduct, with that of the inherent virtue of the aged and aging objects, marked well with use. It is as much a mode of presence, through an accumulation of events and traces, as it is an aesthetic.

Photography has exceptional status in the visual arts. It has been stigmatised as an avatar of absence, darkness, death, things which are not, most notably by Susan Sontag who at times seemed to regard every photograph as murder. Young certainly

appreciates and makes use of the horror that a photograph can inspire. For him, however, it invokes absolute presence, the unbearable density of being. He may be about to redefine the accepted artistic version of the photographic.

Most anti-photographic paranoia stems from a misconceived analogy between the camera and single point perspective, such as that employed by Masaccio in his *Trinity* fresco, in Santa Maria Novella Florence, where the viewer must stand on a specific floor tile in order to appreciate the perspective. Pinned down before Masaccio's massive apparatus like a butterfly in a display cabinet, the viewer loses all sense of independent presence. The camera, a machine to produce single point perspective, is held to suck the presence out of every image, endowing the photographer with the power of life and death.

Young, however, lives in anxious apprehension of the world around him. His images offer means to engage and humanise its presence. In any case, photography and the camera are not interdependent. Consider the biggest photograph ever made, a genuine case of 'photodeath'. In Hiroshima the 'shadows' of those vaporised by the light of the nuclear bomb were burnt into walls and bridges. Ultimately a photograph is a shadow, a stain made by light. Young's use of two images is in a part a disavowal of conventional camera vision. He has discovered that if he shifts his position before these images he experiences entirely new spaces. He is present in a new light. It was the surrealists who first spoke of artworks as 'communicating vessels' linking separate universes.

The stains and marks that Young records overlap and amplify the stain that is the photograph. This is clearest in *drei #06/#47* – two empty interiors, defined by stained concrete and masonry. There is something of the crime scene about both, but the stains themselves mark the corrosion of orderly space through time by an overwhelming presence. There is no absent victim, no fleeing murderer, merely things as they are and have been.

In photographs faces too are stains. Several works in *drei* juxtapose a black and white portrait with an interior. The close-up portrait is central to Young's work. There is a saying, "*his face was like an empty room*". Certainly these lived-in faces have similar qualities of presence to their assigned interiors. Occasionally Young retakes them several times for exactly the right effect.



The folded asymmetry of the bearded male face in *drei* #43/#13 opens the possibility of reading the history of its lines and creases as one might note chips and cracks in paintwork. The overwhelming surfeit of presence, for which Young has worked so hard, has little to do with likeness, a lot with a human condition. It works with the interior to its right with its Mondrian construction and the open door which frames a bright red fire extinguisher perfectly placed on the floor to balance the horizontals and verticals around it.

Young is fascinated by heroic photographers such as Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans. This image recalls Evans' picture of the open entrance to the house of the Burroughs family from his portfolio in *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*. It is a more complex scene but Evans is also working towards a sense of overwhelming presence, balancing the volumes of a water jar and an oil lamp in the empty door frame.

An open door is always an invitation to cross a threshold. It marks the space between. The recurrent doors in *drei*, almost closed, half-open and empty door frames, point to the threshold, the space between two images in every work. In *drei* #52/*drei* #03 the shadow beyond the half open street door positions



the viewer for the jump cut to the pile of bicycles to the left. Another way to approach *drei* would be to see each pair of photographs as a movie montage except that one is invited to remain between the two. 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.

Top left

Masaccio, *The Holy Trinity, with the Virgin and Saint John and donors* (Santa Maria Novella, Florence. ca. 1425-1427). Source: Wikimedia Commons

Top right

Walker Evans, *Washstand in the dog run and kitchen of Floyd Burroughs' cabin, Hale County, Alabama* (detail) (1936). Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division