

PREFACE

Tom Hunter's *Living in Hell and Other Stories* exhibition, showing at the National Gallery until 12th March 2006, marks something of a breakthrough. For the last 20 years or so, the National Gallery has been inviting contemporary painters and sculptors to make their responses to its collection. And now we have a photographer.

This invitation was not because the National Gallery has finally noticed that photography is a valid form of artistic expression. Tom was invited because he is an artist with his own unique vision. The medium he works with is not the issue. It is what he does with it that is important. The same is true for the other participants in this exhibition. Photography, like painting, is only a medium and is nothing special in itself. It is how the medium is used that is special.

The work shown here – unexpected, thoughtful, provocative and sometimes very beautiful – connects in various ways to the language of painting. Over the last 700 years or more, painters have established methods of engaging the viewer that have become part of the tradition of painting. The artists of RE-STAGE have shaped this tradition to fit their own ways of communicating. They have worked with ideas learnt from painters of the past but have also challenged them, subverted them, extended them and therefore renewed them. Re-staged them.

Artists such as Degas, Sickert, Bacon and Warhol have all found different ways of working with photography. Here however, the flow of ideas is reversed. The photographers are now picking things up from the painters. For whatever reasons, since its beginnings photography has had to constantly justify itself as an art form. Tom Hunter's work at the National Gallery and this exhibition at the Arts Gallery mark further steps forward for a medium that, like painting, has infinite and beautiful possibilities.

Colin Wiggins
Deputy Head of Education, National Gallery

INTRODUCTION

The premise of RE-STAGE is that all staged photographs, overtly or otherwise, are a re-staging of something else, whether a story, an event, a situation or another image. RE-STAGE features photography and video work by 13 emerging and more established artists, all of whom are alumni of or closely associated with University of the Arts London. These artists present, through their references to another time, place or space, enhanced feelings of curiosity, tension, uncertainty and unease. In essence, it is this cross-reference and resonance that creates the thread between these artists' work that RE-STAGE attempts to reveal. The exhibition is timed to coincide with Tom Hunter's solo show of staged photographs based on historic paintings, taking place at the National Gallery, London.

Staging in photography, often borrowing from other genres of imagery, emerged partly in response to the debates around documentary realism of the late 20th Century. In effect it constituted a recognition that all photographs are constructed, however convincing they may look, yet at the same time all contain a stubborn and irreducible trace of the real beneath the artifice. Tom Hunter is part of this continuing tradition, and is renowned for creating thought-provoking and often provocative photographs which simultaneously echo both historic painting and the realities of contemporary life. For Hunter re-staging is a method of engaging his audience in the vaguely familiar whilst delivering incisive social observations almost by stealth. Like Hunter, Victoria Hall bases her photographic portraits on well-known historic paintings, in her case in a faithful recreation, placing herself in the role of the female subject and exploring the resonances between past and present female identities.

Johanna Laitanen, on the other hand, photographs the picturesque and painterly re-staging of nature in museum dioramas, seductively revived when removed from their framing context - 'nature morte' becomes 'nature vivante'. And, in a work commissioned when Artist in Residence at London College of Printing (now London College of Communication), Clare Strand marries the present-day inhabitants and the Dickensian past of Clerkenwell, using painted theatrical backdrops and the conventions of Victorian studio portraiture to evoke a timeless cast of characters in whom past and present collide.

This highlights another curious quality of the staged tableau, in that its very stillness and composure draw out both the time of the image and the process of looking at and taking in. This is particularly apparent in the work of Bianca Brunner, whose subjects appear suspended in a disconcerting zone somewhere between conscious and sub-conscious, whilst seemingly engaged in opaque and curious rituals. Similarly, Swedish artist Cathrine Sundqvist's arresting, large-scale photographs of stable girls and horses are disquieting, but also classical and

composed, capturing poses that are at once convincing and dreamlike, while Matthew Hawkins' documentary images hover on the edges of transient and incidental moments of uncertain importance, fixing them forever in a state of quiet irresolution.

The portrait has always been caught between the authentic and the staged. In her series of work 'Eigenzeit', Wiebke Leister asks the question: "How can photography find a visual translation for invisible states of mind?" The resulting careful chiaroscuro of her subjects' faces and expressions is reminiscent of the small dramas at the edges of classical paintings. Bettina von Zwehl's portraits show sitters preoccupied by rituals of her devising rather than engaged in projecting their own identities, raising issues of context and control. Andrea Muendelein's sets of Polaroid portraits permit an exploration of mood and intimacy that allows for a different and more direct encounter with the person photographed, yet one that is no less staged.

Two of the last bodies of work exhibited here explore the boundaries of documentary in different ways. Emma Innocenti's autobiographical work, 'Photonovela', an obsessive and detailed reconstruction of a relationship re-enacted by actors and friends, is based on a documentary archive that can never be shown. In Martina Klich's video installation, a camera pans around a room, showing people at first engrossed in conversation then gradually becoming aware of the camera's gaze, exploring the moment when reality and staging meet.

Finally, in Maria Kontis' sumptuous, monochrome, pastel drawings it is the re-photographed snapshots that are themselves re-staged. Kontis says, "I create something that is no longer the photograph but remains very close to it, like a second skin. Just close enough, but never the same". As in the other works in this show, image and source are tantalisingly close, always present yet never the same.

In closing, we must thank the staff and tutors that helped make these artists' journeys possible, the artists themselves, the gallery staff at the University and most importantly Colin Wiggins, who, by backing Tom Hunter's show at the National Gallery, has finally allowed the work of a photographer to appear there for the first time and has helped illuminate what an important aspect of photography re-staging has become.

Julian Rodriguez and Anne Williams
Curators

Bettina Von Zwehl
Profiles II, no 7 2002
C-type print
100 x 76cm



Andrea Muendelein
Claudia 2005
Polaroid originals
5 x 4 inches (12.7 x 10.2cm)



RE-STAGE

Bianca Brunner

Victoria Hall

Matthew Hawkins

Tom Hunter

Emma Innocenti

Martina Klich

Maria Kontis

Johanna Laitanen

Wiebke Leister

Andrea Muendelein

Clare Strand

Cathrine Sundqvist

Bettina von Zwehl