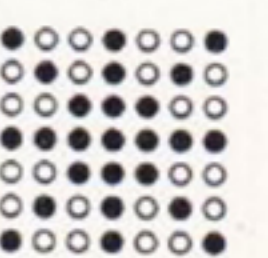


This exhibition links a number of artists whose work blurs the distinction between 'pictures' and 'photography'. In a sense, all the work is quite blatantly seen to be lying. The camera, as much as any brush or palette knife, can be used to manipulate, mould, conceal, reveal, edit and excise, and these pictures prove it. Some of the swagger that comes off the large prints is to do with breaking the expectation of what a photograph should or shouldn't be.

¶ The selected work was all made during the last half of the 1980s and first years of the 90s. In one form or another, it examines various conventions of picture-making – from the established traditions of religious iconography, landscape, still life and history painting to techniques such as collage, montage and enlargement. The concern with composition runs throughout the exhibition. In Keith Arnatt's series, *Objects from a Rubbish Dump*, the squashed Coke bottles, fly papers, plastic toys and jammy debris that usually get edited out of our conception of Nature come right to the fore. Picked out of a dump in the Wye Valley (famous as a Beauty Spot throughout the British Isles), these by-products of a post-industrial nation spell out the illusion which the very word nature seems to imply. The Wye Valley is still thought of largely in terms of the images created in the 19th century by its most famous interpreters, Turner and Wordsworth. Today, well planted with commuter homes, fish and chip parlours and

antique shoppes, it still survives in the imagination as an area of unsullied rural splendour, as if nature had no truck with the world of commerce and man-made materials. This cosy view of nature, so enshrined in the British view of the countryside, is lovingly exposed by Arnatt as more artificial than the plastics, fake furs and chemically impregnated papers that the inhabitants of the countryside habitually tidy from view.

¶ Hallowed conceptions are also taken apart in Ron O'Donnell's *Adam and Eve*. O'Donnell freely admits having to look up art history books to see how the Old Masters composed the subject: on which side of the tree Adam and Eve respectively stood, how big the tree was, who held the apple etc. The garden of earthly delights that he reconstructs is suitably made from cardboard, as if allowing wood pulp one more go at being a tree again. And here, at the genesis of all our beings, at the heart of the greatest recycling activity of all, plastics enter again, this time in the shape of a couple of packets of Play Safe Durex, carried aloft in a little tray by a winged putto. Pre-conceived ideas, especially about pre-conception, are stopped dead in their tracks. Other obvious transpositions from the works of the Old Masters occur in Tim Head's *Deluge*, where a welter of used Kleenex resemble the pure-driven packs of ice and snow that conventionally denote Alpine scenery (ref. Caspar David Friedrich and JMW Turner), and in



Helen Chadwick's *Meat Abstracts*, where the carnality and superabundance of the late 20th century is taken to Mannerist conclusions. Her starkly lit tableaux of giblets swagged in satin and livers and lights atop platters of unplucked skin recall Caravaggio's compositions.

¶ References to the history of image-making are pervasive. Where there is no history, Lea Andrews makes one up. In the blank shopping parade of Sonning Common, typical of so much post-war development in Britain and the town in which he grew up, Andrews introduces a full-scale War Memorial. Cobbled together from a photograph of the artist dressed up in First World War uniform and the bottom section of Lutyens' Cenotaph in Whitehall (the bit with 'THE GLORIOUS DEAD'), the photograph was first enlarged, then pasted onto plywood and erected, with the aid of props, in a gap between a butcher's and a chemist's shop. Touchingly a veteran of World War II brought out a poppy wreath to lay at the foot of this two-dimensional photographic model, real memory superimposing itself upon the imposed and invented Memorial.

¶ What constitutes the point at which images are fixed also preoccupies Helen Sear. Her photographs are constructed by re-photographing projected slides, sometimes several exposures on one negative. Interiors drowned in reflected light and museum-cased birds seemingly about to take wing suggest that all visual information is in a constant state of flux, always decomposing and reconstituting itself in the light of new circumstances.

¶ Decomposition in the sense of original matter dissolved is another thread that runs throughout the exhibition. At its most straightforward it

is a concern with environmental issues. At a more complex level, the relationship between surfeit and decay, glamour and deprecation, use and re-use, is constantly woven into the picture. Boyd Webb's inflatable giraffes, crowned with laurels and encircling a schoolroom globe, are engaged in an endless tournament for diminishing natural resources. Mari Mahr's rhino, so foursquare and low on the ground, appears surprisingly haunted against the flaps of waxed tarpaulin that closely resemble its own impregnable hide. The shells suspended from a net in Hannah Collins' silver gelatin print and the grinning monkeys, song thrushes and carpet lions in Calum Colvin's triptych betoken the brittle existence of items plundered from their natural surroundings and requisitioned for another use – brittle but also oddly beautiful in their new synthetic role.

¶ Another factor common to nearly all the work in the exhibition is its large scale. Naturally dramatic, the large format celebrates the camera's ability to exploit technological advances in the manner most appropriate to the age of oil-based plastics. From the confident gloss of Boyd Webb's big cibachromes, to the exquisite silver gelatin printing on a colossal scale employed by Hannah Collins, these works demonstrate that technical innovation married to a sure understanding of the fundamentals of picture-making can create a wholly original format in which to carry modern meaning. It was Picasso who said that you had to create lies to get at the truth. In these works the lies are many and the truths manifest.

Andrea Rose *Curator*
The British Council Collection

