

Helen Sear
2XJR 1998



In the end, both shows are concerned with the relationship between the individual and the larger structures which shape us. 'Inbreeder' looks at Englishness from within and also from outside by virtue of the Scottish location for the show. Blain's work forces us to ask whether these disturbing images are merely historical spectacle or ways of seeing that remain with us today. ■

Elisabeth Mahoney is a freelance writer based in Glasgow.

■ Helen Sear

Anderson O'Day Fine Art London March 20 to May 30

Since closing their gallery in the Portobello Road, Anderson O'Day have converted the ground floor of their North Kensington home into offices and a gallery space in which they plan to hold occasional exhibitions. This

show, intended to celebrate the year of photography, marks the inauguration of this project.

'Twice ... Once' is part of an ongoing body of work by the artist Helen Sear and is a departure from the more abstracted colour images she has previously produced. Eight large (91.5cm x 99cm) black and white photographic portraits, framed in pale wood, dominate the pristine gallery (which opens onto a conservatory filled with jasmine and hibiscus). The images are not ordinary portraits in any traditional sense. Instead of the sharp focus and clearly delineated features more usually associated with portrait photography, these amorphous chiaroscuros have more in common with drawings or with Gerhard Richter's blurred photograph-like paintings. The specific identities of the sitters are erased as faces are reduced to pale, soft ovals with all defining planes flattened to whiteness. Only the deep shadowed eye sockets remain. Their mouths are smudged and silent, their noses reduced to the merest suggestion of nostrils. Sear photographed her subjects in the stark

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head and shoulders format of the passport photo, and all reference to context is eliminated. Some of the faces emerge from deep shadow while others are defined by black hair outlined against irregular patches of bright, white light. The focus is soft, the images are unsettling. Here is the subject effaced, the individual reduced to light and shadow.

The old idea that the photographic portrait can somehow express the truth about a subject's character still holds sway in certain quarters. Hence the continuing proliferation in weekend supplements of portraits of the economically marginalised. These mistake the ravages of poverty inscribed on their faces as signs of character and reassuring human dignity. Sear's disembodied, blank faces make no such assertions and so expose the limits of photography. Drained of all significant physical characteristics these subjects have no wrinkles, no moles, no blemishes of any kind; even gender is ambiguous. Yet despite the evacuation of information from the features of each head, it is precisely this lack of fixity which gives the work its strength as well as its suggestion of interiority. In turn, this provides the recognition of there being something beneath the surface that is familiar but that is not fixed, in any sense, on the particular interior life of any of the individuals portrayed.

Sear draws on Freud's notion of the *unheimlich* – the uncanny sense that what is secret and hidden is also somehow ghastly. Lacan reworked this notion and came up with the term *extémité*, a blurring of the line between interiority and exteriority which points to neither but is located where they coincide and become threatening.

The title 'Twice ... Once' suggests that Sear photographed her subjects two times on the same negative. Such a strategy would account for the soft, fuzzy focus which seems to refer to the passage of time, to the minutes or seconds which passed while faces rearranged themselves. The effect is of a permeable boundary between the figure and the ground, and the portraits seemed to reverberate in the white room. The faces, like blank screens on which one struggles to project a content, stare back with vacant looks denying access. A few of them seemed to peer beyond me as if at an unseen presence but most returned my gaze with shocked expressions that left me feeling stranded, unable to invent a narrative or impose an explanation on who or what I was seeing. Catching sight of my reflection in the glass on one image was strangely reassuring as if to confirm my aliveness in contrast to their inert, deathly faces.

In some ways these pictures reminded me of Christian Boltanski's blow-ups taken from anonymous group photographs. There, extreme enlarging eliminates all detail and renders the faces timeless, nameless shadows standing in for everyone. Sear's photographs have a similar anonymous quality but standing alone without the benefit of lights or biscuit tins to prop up meaning, they generate a kind of quiet anxiety. And unlike Boltanski's

pictures which bear the marks, the pronounced grain of excessive enlargement, Sear's images have smooth, thick, velvety surfaces which are so sensually appealing they not only suggest interiority but actually elicit a desire to penetrate or incorporate them in some way. Deprived of names or any other fixed point of reference, the viewer is left in a vacuum of not-knowing.

In this place of *extémité*, Sear's portraits oscillate between a vacant, sensuous exterior and an imagined, replete interior and it is this borderline play which gives the work its uncanny power. ■

Valerie Reardon lectures at Falmouth College of Arts.

■ Avis Newman

Lisson Gallery London March 26 to May 9

Avis Newman's six new paintings, 'Meridians', present both a formal and poetic development of her recent 'Webs Backlight' series. They could also be seen as a response to the critical discourse that accompanied these works. Perceiving them as melancholy invocations of the absent, Michael Newman defined the 'Webs Backlight' paintings as representations of shadows. He extended the metaphor of the shadow in an essay on the origin of drawing which, according to Pliny the Elder, began when Butades' daughter tried to preserve her lover's likeness by tracing the silhouette of his shadow on a wall. Newman concludes: 'to take a shadow as an origin is to suggest that drawing begins not in the imitation of something that is present but rather in the anticipation of a withdrawal'. In 'Meridians' the shadow is actually cast and the topos of present absence is treated almost figuratively.

While the 'Webs Backlight' glowed with their own effulgence, suggesting a timeless pictorial 'other space', the 'Meridians' – shadows suspended between the painted ether and the surface marks – allude, in our own space, to something almost climatic. It is as if Dürer's etching *Melancholia* of 1514, which has long been a conceptual reference for Newman, has now become a pictorial source. The stormy light of the Dürer image, a metaphor for the enigma of the creative spirit, also infuses the 'Meridians', and the canvases hung together give the impression of time and weather passing and, as Stella Santacaterina has written, the 'rotational movement of the light of darkness and doubt'.

However, paradox is at the core of Newman's work and we are never allowed to slip too far into the illusion before being brought to focus on lines and marks which indicate an artistic process. In 'Meridians' the play of illusionistic space and surface mark making is elaborated by a reworking of the ground. The nebulous ground, which in the 'Webs Backlight' paintings suggested a natural phenomenon so strongly that it almost hid the artist's intentionality, is now subject to concep-

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