

Spellbound

New Photography by Helen Sear

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HELEN SEAR FASCINATES US with a world below the surface, coming on this 'elsewhere' via a combination of landscape and studio-based photography. By photographing and rephotographing these set-ups, Sear hunts along with the camera. Or she will use extended time exposures, leaving the camera lens open over night, to reveal the image. The hunt ends when appearance breaks apart to allow a new equation between documentary photography and penumbras of hidden association. As the writer, Susan Butler, has perceptively noted, the viewer of Sear's images, 'like the artist who has produced them, also works in shadows of half knowing, half not knowing, unable to predict in advance in what an understanding might consist.'¹

Yes, and yet... In the new series, *Gone to Earth* (1994), six C-type prints (each 42 x 62 inches), and *Covert* (1995), five C-type prints (each 30 x 30 inches), Sear is intentioned. This direction had begun as early as 1989 in an installation at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, which the artist made with Sharon Morris, entitled, *Green House, Yellow Lemon*. The exhibition included an odd assortment of photographs whose meaning we understand via the group's common reference to natural cycles of origin, growth and decay. Significantly, neither science, reliant on observation, categorisation and analysis, nor non-rational systems of belief, here, religion and mythology - both signified in this collection - can separately explain the cycle.

Whilst working on the exhibition, Sear read Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, which describes a journey of escape in an unspecified future time, in which the book's main protagonist, Marianne, flees the walled community of professors with Jewel, an outsider and barbarian. They travel through a world where 'losing their names... things underwent a process of uncreation and reverted to chaos.'²

At that time Sear also read *The Parables of the Cave*, a text which discussed the existence of recurrent imagery in women's writing, of searches through labyrinthian caverns, and the discovery of a new Atlantis. Exemplified particularly was Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man* (1826), in which the writer gives an account of her own visit to the Sybil's Cave in Cumae, Italy, the earliest Greek settlement which Sear herself visited and photographed in 1990. Shelley's book recounts the author's chance entry into the cave, and her collection of the remains of the Greek prophetess's Sibylline Books. In laboriously stitching together these fragments, the story implies, Shelley deciphers her own creativity.

A century later, Freud, in his exploration of human psychology, called the cave: 'a female place, a womb-shaped enclosure, a house of earth often, secret and sacred....'³ Like Shelley, he searched to understand human creativity, returning metaphorically to this place of antiquity through his collection of ancient fragments, for him icons representing human psychology.⁴ Nonetheless, his psychoanalytic theory is one which inverts the parable of the cave, overturning its discovery of women's emergence into knowledge to signify instead women's descent into a destiny limited by biology.⁵ Helen Sear's photography palpably rejects this element of Freud and instead co-opts the landscape-as-self metaphor, so that the signs of society's habitation - sacred places, buildings, animals, roadways and lights, as they collapse into wilderness become the raw material for an 'almost real' location, time and species of being.

In this 'almost real', Sear has kept the surface appearance of things but has abandoned causality and overt reference to camera manipulation. This can be seen in two works: *The Surface Beneath* (1991), three C-type prints (triptych 132 x 36 inches), and *Moments of Capture IV* (1993), one of four cibachrome prints (each 24 x 24 inches). In the first, three abutted panels show light varied by mediating agents. In the left and right panels a hand grasps an electric bulb, the flesh irradiated, and in middle panel, an image of a building in landscape is rocked by volcanic eruption. With *Moments of Capture IV*, Sear discards the use of analogy across several images for a single image in which a face wreathed by hair and feathers is made to sparkle from a starry crown (or mask) of light. This creature has its counterpart in the artist's most recently exhibited works, *Gone to Earth I-VI*.

Each of the images in the series, as noted above, is a large C-type colour print whose dimensions are that of a classical easel painting. This and the quality of the images - each is almost abstract with large areas of colour, having an uncertain delineation of subject matter in close focus - makes the photographic surface an unsettled medium of reportage. In a contradictory gesture, Sear insisted on producing this haunting ambiguity from the pedestrian, using lifeless found props, so that, Pygmalion-like *she* co-opts time exposure, viewpoint and lighting, to undo the fixity of photography's decisive moment.

The shadows of this half-read ambiguity insinuates itself as a desire of, or terror in, dissolution of the body's boundaries. So intense are these images that they hold fast to

us. We see them in a manner described by the literary critic Maurice Blanchot as: 'the ceaseless, endless gaze of a seeing blindness, a gaze which no longer makes seeing possible but which makes not seeing impossible... this world is eminently attractive and fascinating - a light which is also darkness, a terrifying, spellbinding, all-engulfing luminosity.'⁶

Underneath our fixation with the images, drawing us closer still, is the volatile, hybrid, appearance of the wild animals in *Gone to Earth*, pictured, invaded by a monitoring technology used in medicine, LEDs (light emitting diodes).

It is both the surveillance of wilderness, that 'elsewhere' of possibilities referred to above, which these hybrids imply and the reawakening in us of an injunction against the pollution of wholeness. A rounded discussion of this injunction is given by the anthropologist, Mary Douglas, in her book, *Purity and Danger*. Although this cannot be fully expanded here, in brief Douglas discusses how meaning is invested by non-Western cultures through the functions of the human body. These ritual symbols, she contends, not only reflect the well-being of various societies, but maintain it through a symbolic protection of community boundaries and class structure. Douglas traces in Western society similar injunctions to the biblical text, *The Abominations of Leviticus XIX, 19*, which sets out dietary laws and laws of cleanliness, to conclude that: 'holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.'⁷

Venturing onto this territory of hybridity, *Gone to Earth* makes layered reference to both gendered identity and genetic engineering to speculate on social control in an era when the virtual might replace the biological body.⁸ Proposing neither regressive Darwinism, nor a cyborg society, *Gone to Earth* keeps the two worlds visible and in collision.

Covert I-V are the most recent of Sear's photographs. Not yet exhibited, the series can be shown individually or in constellations. Whereas the process of sourcing and subsequent manipulation of the set remains consistent with that of earlier works, these comprise a single landscape feature and its variants. A mound of sand predominates on which dry, foliageless, curling stems clump, touching the left and right side of the frame, immersed in a darkly luminous, empty backdrop. An a-social borderland, the earth shows no traces of human use. Amorphous, it is difficult to optically measure the details of its surface, despite the clarity with which they are reproduced photographically.

Sear uses this 'yes and no' - the clear impenetrability of the image - to hold and expel the viewer's

attention. There is an implication that we must attend to something buried or embedded in this odd burrow, concealed not only by nature, but by the coloured fluid which heightens the image. And there is a nothingness. A non-place that shows extremes of desert and ocean. A tomb and the mound of Venus. A current that runs out of us to something that is of us, but not as us. The work's title, *Covert*, adds another layer to this ambiguity. When the fox emerges from its covert, it breaks cover; the hunt and the savage battle for survival begins. Unlike Sear's work of 1993 where the wild animal, always present, is centre frame, now paradoxically its presence is implied. But this time its address to the viewer is stronger still. It does not go to ground.

1. Susan Butler, 'Nocturne', in *Helen Sear*, John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton, in association with Ffotogallery, Cardiff; Montage Gallery, Derby, July, 1995.
2. Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, Penguin Books, London, 1981, p.136.
3. 'The Parables of the Cave' in *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, photocopy to the author from the photographer, publication details unavailable, p.93.
4. An excellent description of Freud's collection, its display and uses, can be found in Jack J. Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1974.
5. The artist Susan Hiller, who trained as an anthropologist, was Sear's tutor at the Slade School of Art and is acknowledged by Sear as a continuing influence on her. Since the early 1970s, Hiller's work has explored unspoken languages of identity embedded in the icons of mass culture and, in parallel, those buried in the language of Western abstraction, whose sources were steeped in practices of surrealist automatism.
6. Maurice Blanchot, *The Siren's Song*, ed. Gabriel Josipovici, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1982, p.107.
7. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger - An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p.54.
8. Following on Jeffrey Deutsch's 1993 exhibition, *Posthuman*, the 1995 Venice Biennale, with its exhibition, *Identity and Alterity - Figures and the Body 1895/1995*, has thrown light on this area of speculation, and Sear's work would have found an appropriate context there, along with the other exhibited artists - Nancy Burson, Sammy Cucher, Inez von Lamsweede and Thomas Ruff.



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