

**Critical Commentary in partial fulfilment of a Doctor of Philosophy
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Reconstructing Experience : Completed 2009

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DVD: SEAR, H. 2008. *Projection*

DVD: SEAR, H. 2002. *Light Seeking Transparency*

Introduction:

In the bedroom I placed it on some leaves on top of the chest of drawers. When I put the light out, the glow-worm glowed again. At the back of the dressing table was a mirror, which faced the window. If I lay on my side I saw a star reflected in the mirror and the glow-worm beneath on the chest of drawers. The only difference between them was that the light of the glow-worm was slightly greener, more glacial, further away. (Berger, 1984:08)

The first time I read *And our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* by John Berger, 1984, it encapsulated many of the contradictions and wonderment of lived moments; of being situated between the minute and the infinite; an overwhelming sense of the clarity and convergence of time, space, light and emotion from a fixed viewpoint. A quickening of the heart in the midst of a feeling of being overpowered and yet seeing so clearly; two phenomena appearing before the eyes both existing in different times and spaces; that which cannot be easily articulated.

I have worked towards representing that feeling through the photographic medium with its mirrors and one 'eye', to articulate a relationship to the outside world that is not only two-eyed, but two eyes in a body. I was seduced by the seamless perfection of the surface of the photograph, its wet shiny gloss, the magic of the dark room and the alchemy of the appearance of the image as if seen for the first time. But it is the second time; there is a gap between the image first seen in the camera and the moment at which the image appears in the developing tray. With the photograph, the body seemed absent, no

markings or interruptions of the surface of the image as in a painting. It was suppressed and sealed, creating a yearning or a desire for the physical. The frustration of the thinness of the paper and its lack of substance prompted a greater desire to explore the sensual or active properties of the image. Not as something that is merely represented and contained within the image as Barthes' description of the 'studium' or narrative tableau, but the image as an active object, on an equal par with the viewer and not merely the passive recipient of the gaze. How is it possible for the viewer and the photograph to have a mutually activated relationship? Roland Barthes' disrupting factor in the image the punctum – described a piercing or wounding, something which stings the viewer.

Jane Gallop states in her essay on Barthes, "The Prick of the Object" in *Thinking*

Through The body:

The piercing arrow brings us close to a tradition of a certain mystic discourse in which otherness enters you in some way that is ecstatic. Ecstasy is when you are no longer within your own frame: some sort of going outside takes place. (Gallop 1988: 152)

Comparing cinema with the photograph, Barthes states:

The screen (as Bazin has remarked) is not a frame but a hideout; the man or woman who emerges from it continues living; a "blindfield" constantly doubles our partial vision. (Barthes 2000: 57)

Without the punctum the subjects in the photograph remain 'anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies' (Barthes 2000: 58). With it (the punctum) traffic is permitted in and out through the image. The photographs Barthes writes about are unaltered in the sense of any interference with the original negative or print, and in this sense Barthes' punctum is a represented detail within the photograph. If a more physical approach was taken in the construction of the image— perhaps a photo-sculptural or a time-based approach, how would this change the experience of the image? How could various

interventions in the production and postproduction of the photographic image/object extend the point where the viewer and image are animated by one another? This idea of reciprocity and an adding to what is already there in the image is something I have explored in the making of pictures, the conception of an idea running parallel with an intuitive response to situations and materials; to address a punctum-like experience both as subject of, and response to, the work. Barthes only considered the punctum at the point of receiving or experiencing the photograph, not as something the photographer might have consciously considered in its making. It is not my intention to reframe Barthes' writing but to emphasise his importance in relation to my own explorations of the affective qualities of the photographic image/object.

In this commentary I want to examine how I have visualised the unseen, an unconscious felt interior, through a medium largely associated with recording the outside world. In addition to that which is represented in the image, I have engaged with strategies to re-present the nature of experience, by which I mean extending the experience of taking and reconstructing an image to the experience of viewing the completed work. If the word strategy implies a degree of resistance, this resistance would be directed at a dominant fixed viewpoint, iconographic and topographic approach to landscape photography, and the technical implications associated with photography and its inherent maleness. I have taken into consideration the possibilities of a gendered perspective and explored the possibilities of a fragmented experience being aligned with the feminine. This was articulated using Mary Shelley's fictitious author's introduction to her book *The Last Man*, where she describes collecting the fragments of leaves and bark in the Sybil's cave

at Cuma, Italy, upon which were inscribed various prophecies in many languages. (Shelley, 2004:1-4) Shelley decides to make it her life's work to decipher these fragments, which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use as an example of her own feminine creativity. (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 96) I see my practice as part of a history of attempting to articulate the feminine without taking the essentialist position of 'woman as nature.'

I have also explored, through visual media, the relationship between the feminine and nature in relationship to the sublime experience that has largely been explored through literary criticism, where the feminine has taken the form of identification with, rather than an appropriation of, excess, vastness and the indefinable.

The internal contradiction so central to the history of the sublime is that its theorists regularly claim for the spectator a state of detachment that, were it to exist, would nullify the very features of rapture, merger, and identification that characterize and define the sublime, for the sublime event is precisely one in which what happens to "the other" also happens to the subject who perceives it. (Freeman, 1997: 05)

Using the camera, which essentially prioritizes sight over the other senses, I have attempted to recuperate the body into the act of looking and explore the corporeality of vision through various processes of layering, drawing, excavating and rupturing, both in the still and moving image.

This has taken the form of two parallel strands. The first involves the recurring depiction of the animal and human body in conjunction with, or as landscape, and images that represent an intersection or juxtaposition between the cultural and the natural. How can

these depictions function without falling into an essentialist position of ‘woman as nature’?

The second strand is an investigation into challenging the technologies and processes associated with photography in order to reconfigure a conventional photographic perspective. This has been achieved through the constructed image, both digital and otherwise, to relocate our psychological and corporeal viewing selves. Jonathan Crary’s writings on the impact of the study of afterimages, and viewing devices such as the thaumatrope (a small disc of card with string attached either side with a different image on either side appeared to merge when the string was twirled with the hand) have been central in informing my research and working methods.

The simplicity of this “philosophical toy” made unequivocally clear both the fabricated and hallucinatory nature of its image and the rupture between perception and its object. (Crary, 1999: 106)

His writing on Goethe’s optical studies with the camera obscura leading to the dissolving of distinctions between inner and outer space, and the human body becoming the active producer of optical experience, have also been influential.

What is important about Goethe’s account of subjective vision is the inseparability of two models usually presented as distinct and irreconcilable: a physiological observer who will be described in increasing detail by the empirical sciences in the nineteenth century, *and* an observer posited by various “romanticisms” and early modernisms as the active, autonomous producer of his or her own visual experience. (Crary, 1999: 69)

Referring to constructed photographic practice as it developed through the 1980’s to the present day, I will locate my work through a number of discrete series, exhibitions and

publications, to demonstrate my contribution to the field as being original, critical and influential in the development of this practice and extending it through an engagement with installation, video and lens-based digital art. I will map my emergence from a Fine Art background of sculptural installation, performance, film and video work in the 1980s, to describe the various themes and methods I have engaged with which to extend and develop the language and experience of the still photographic image and related moving image work.

I will begin by focussing on the practice of constructed photography, which came to the fore in the 1980s, both in the US, and Europe. I will particularly examine a hybrid use of both 'straight' and constructed methods of lens-based image making, and how the methods I have employed, have been directly connected to questions of visualising the unseen and re-locating the position of the viewer in relation to the image. I will also demonstrate how I have questioned the effects of new technologies on the way we currently experience the photographic image. These works reflect different strategies and methods in approaching my earlier examinations, and demonstrate that my approach has produced several substantial bodies of work, that have had significant impact upon current photographic art practice. A distinguishing feature of my work is its relationship with the painterly, extended through methods of production rather than solely referencing subject matter, and exploring the phenomenology of the image through a hybrid use of projection layering and digital technologies.

Although each body of work discussed is separate, I regard the whole of my practice over the last 25 years as being closely related, and this commentary will only address a small portion of this work. I will discuss the exhibition *De Composition (Constructed Photography in Britain) 1991-1998* as a significant beginning for the work selected, and will conclude with two current works firstly *Display 2008* — a series of digitally manipulated photographs, and *Projection 2007*, a video installation— and their close relationship with the earlier exhibited and published works. The exhibitions and work are interlinked and cross-referenced under themed chapter headings.

The works presented include:

1991-1998 *De Composition (Constructed Photography in Britain)*, British Council (touring group exhibition)

1994-1995 *Gone to Earth*, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton (solo exhibition and catalogue) Toured to Ffotogallery, Cardiff and Montage Gallery, Derby

2002 *Twice*, monograph featuring two bodies of work *Twice...Once* and *Grounded*.

2003 *Hide*, Ffotogallery (solo exhibition) featured three bodies of work.

a. *Spot* originally commissioned by Yard Gallery, Nottingham, 2002, and also exhibited in part in the exhibition *La Mirada Reflexiva* 2004.

b. *Still... A landscape in ten parts* 2002

c. *Light Seeking Transparency* 2001 (Video Installation)

2004-2008 Inside *The View* Centre for Creative Photography, Gallerie Harmonia, Jyvaskyla, Finland

Chapter One: De Composition

In Michael Kohler's extensive essay which forms the background of the book and exhibition *Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography*, shown at four institutions in Munich, Nurnberg, Bremen and Karlsruhe in 1989 he states that he has focussed on the predominant trend of this decade of arranging, constructing and staging tableaux specifically for the camera where no alteration of the exposed negative or print is made. In other words the construction takes place exclusively in front of the camera. His focus is on the artists he believes were striving to 'slaughter the sacred cow of modernism'. He aligns modernism with 'straight photography' in the US and New Objectivity in Germany and describes this practice as 'a photographic art which finds its standards of value in the inherent strengths of the camera.' (Koehler, 1989:18) The ascendancy of the photographic image in advertising and consumer culture in the 1980s employed an appeal to seduction and sensuality above reason and reality, and many of the artists selected in this exhibition employed the rhetoric of this approach to the photographic image.

This was one context within which my work was framed during the 1990s but I would also align my practice with earlier investigations into a three dimensional engagement with the photographic image through the Fine Art practice of installation work in the 1980's.

On completion of my post graduate studies in 1983, I worked with video and the projected photographic image experimenting with the sculptural presence of these ephemeral media within gallery and museum installations, inviting the viewer to enter the frame of the artwork. It was this practice that I brought to bear on my subsequent construction of the discrete photographic image. One important work *Between Us* exhibited at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff in 1985, explored the idea of the gallery space as a 'broken' camera, the construction of the images projected within the space referring directly to the photographic process. (fig.1a and 1b) A central platform was made from pieces of broken mirror laid onto a series of light boxes, the intensity of which was constantly changing through a computerised dimming mechanism.

The silver from the back of the mirror was erased to a point where light could both pass through the glass but still retain its function as a reflective surface. This silver was then transferred to gels, which were sandwiched, between the glass of the transparency and the images to be projected. The platform was then used as a surface upon which to project photographic transparencies that were in turn fractured and fragmented around the walls of the gallery, disrupting a sense of wholeness and the boundaries of the conventional

photographic frame. This installation was the first time I had used the idea of the internal mechanism of the camera to convey the fragmentation of images of the human body from continuously changing points of view. This approach was distinct from a practice that used the photographic image as a stage upon which to perform conceptual narratives.

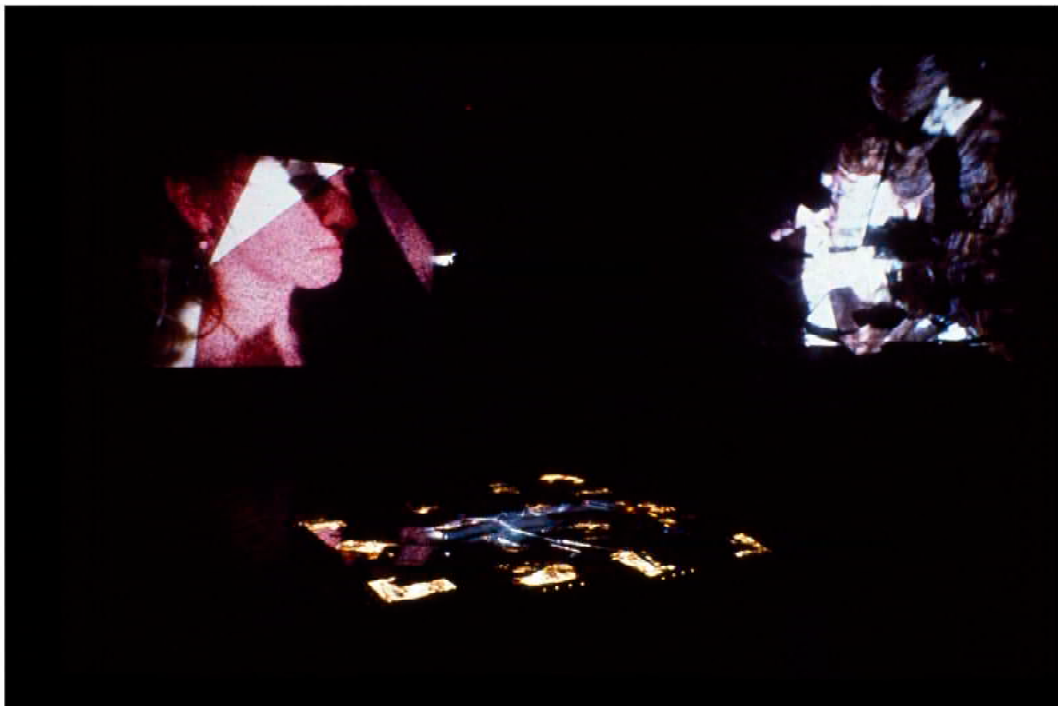


Figure 1a and 1b Sear, H. 1985 *Between Us* Chapter Arts Centre Cardiff (Installation)

Artists who had a direct influence on my practice were Tim Head, Boyd Webb, Susan Hiller, Bernard Faucon, Georges Rouses, Astrid Klein and Keith Arnatt. -

Helen Chadwick is an example of a prominent contemporary artist particularly influential to my practice. She expanded the use of photographic imagery through sculptural installations such as *Ego Geometrica Sum* 1983 and *The Oval Court* 1984 -1986. In the first work, she utilised photographic emulsion on sculptural objects to represent thirty years of her own life as ten solid forms such as pram, piano and door; in the second, she arranged large-scale constructed photocopies of herself surrounded by dead animals, fish, fruits and other cultural ornaments such as pearl necklaces and lace.

Her references to painting architecture and classical literature are extensive and direct, and within both these works her own naked body is brought centre-stage.

I want to catch the physical sensations passing across the body-sensations of gasping, yearning, breathing, fullness... I want to make autobiographies of sensation, to find a resolution between transience and transcendence. (Chadwick, 1989: 40-41)

Placing her own body in distortions of pleasure and excess she qualifies the concept of nature:

Central to the idea of the garden paradise is the female body, as a fundamental element of nature, the embodiment of nature, not in the sense of "Mother Nature" but as a projection of self (Chadwick. 1989: 58)

Although she breaks some of the prevalent feminist taboos of the time surrounding the exploration of the female body, we, as viewers, are nevertheless in these two works,

confronted with looking at her naked body and thus have a relationship to the work, where we are aware of our own body looking at hers from a fixed position. We are witnessing her pleasure and fantasy as it is laid out before us. Helen Chadwick states: 'photography is my skin', not that the photograph has its own other skin.

In 1980, three years before Chadwick's *Ego Geometrica Sum*, I made a work consisting of three small wooden boxes, the outside of which were photographs of my own naked body in the context of life modelling for a sculpture class (my part-time job at the time). These works were exhibited in the ICA as part of the Staircase Project initiated by the director Sandy Nairne. The artist Marc Chaimowicz chose to curate the work of four recently graduated students in the corridor and staircase linking the two main galleries. My subsequent ambivalence about working with my own naked body, combined with a hostile response from some members of the public, challenged me to look for equivalent visual representations to articulate the autobiographical self.

Astrid Klein, Susan Hiller and Nancy Burson had all combined techniques of layering and drawing with the photographic image but the majority of photographic artists of this decade eschewed the physicality of the image in its production and concentrated on the scale of production and the support of the image at the point of presentation afforded by the development of printing methods and new technologies. I will demonstrate that it is the physicality of production in addition to presentation that is central to processes I have employed.

In 1991, Andrea Rose and Brett Rogers of the British Council curated an exhibition *De Composition (Constructed Photography in Britain)*

This exhibition was mounted in 1991 to celebrate the achievements of a new generation of British fine artists who began to use photography as a medium of expression during the late 1980s. Work by senior artists, such as Boyd Webb, Tim Head and Keith Arnatt was shown alongside artists from a slightly younger generation including Helen Sear, Ron O'Donnell, Lea Andrews, Mari Mahr, Hannah Collins and Helen Chadwick. As suggested by the exhibition title, themes of environmental destruction linked much of the work along with the exploration of issues concerned with the history of pictorial expression. (British Council Website)
<http://collection.britishcouncil.org/html/exhibition/exhibition.aspx?id=14668>

The work selected for the exhibition consisted of examples of two photographic series, *Natural Habitat* (fig. 2) and *Projected Interiors*, both employing minimal means of production whilst referring to the high production values and rhetoric of colour-enhanced advertising photography. This was the first body of work I had made to be presented as framed photographs, the methods employed resulting from my previous experience as an installation artist. The installation space of the gallery, usually a white cube, had been replaced by a reconfiguration of the interior of my domestic space, acknowledging the production of the image relating to both an interior/private and exterior/public world. An element of chance and a relinquishing of control introduced at times through multiple exposures took place within the enclosed interior space of the camera.

I constructed sculptural arrangements of perspex cases containing taxidermy specimens of crows, rooks, and rats alongside domestic appliances such as televisions refrigerators and kitchen utensils. These were then photographed as slides and re-projected back into my domestic space and sometimes back onto the arrangements themselves, creating a collision of real objects and projected images. The inclusion of radiators, plug sockets and other domestic features within the image contributed to the idea of the homely, while

the inclusion of the dead, encased animals implied a disruption of the space by nature and the natural world as presented and represented by the institution of the museum.

Utilising slides from a large personal collection as a means of introducing colour and lighting, haunting the present with past images, I fabricated an interior space mimicking the photography in magazines such as *World of Interiors* or *Homes and Gardens* where the photograph itself functioned as a space of desire and the high production values of the image matched the aspirations of a wealthy elite. The projection of the light and colour onto the arrangements in the room for re-photographing had parallels to a cinematic experience of the viewer being between the projected light and the image.

The condensation of time and space into a single image had similarities to Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of cinema screens from 1978 but, while Sugimoto condenses the entire moving image film to white light allowing the viewer a space of contemplation and projection, in the work *Natural Habitat* access was denied as the process of layering the projected onto the real objects in the room produced a superfluity, resulting in a visual excess and a denial of access through conventional photographic perspective. This visual excess and fragmentation has literary roots, particularly in the writings of Mary Shelley. Frankenstein's monster was made from the dismembered fragments of several corpses.¹

¹ I became interested in the writings of Mary Shelley while making a series of photographs '*Spelt From Sybil's Leaves*' 1990, after a poem of the same title by Gerard Manly Hopkins. Her concerns with the decoding of fragments and putting them back together in her novel *The Last Man* are also echoed in her novel *Frankenstein, Or The Modern Prometheus* 1818 and the construction of the Creature in the novel.

The fridge door is open and the crows and ravens stand as sentries in these domestic interiors. Carrion pick flesh off the bodies of the dead, their own decay has been arrested through taxidermy, the camera shutter delivers another sudden or not so sudden death, and yet something is re-animated. Birds have always symbolized the soul and a flight from our fixed position on the earth as well as embodying notions of transformation and metamorphosis. Electricity has the potential for re-animation, and has a different effect on the senses of sight and touch. The refrigerator preserves as does taxidermy and the photograph. Colour is used both to enhance and subvert. I challenged the power of the glossy enhanced colour of the magazine to paint a more apocalyptic vision of consumption. With this method a conventional fixed-point perspective is fragmented and the photograph, can no longer act as a frame or window but becomes more about a fragmentation of positions and the thickness of the image. The space created is no longer inhabitable; there is no room.



Figure 2 SEAR, H. 1991 *Natural Habitat no.2* (Ctype Print)

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 through 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 depredation, use and reuse, is constantly woven into the picture. (Rose, 1991: 02)

The use of large format photography and high production values inherent in advertising photography was utilised by Tim Head, Hannah Collins and Boyd Webb both as subject matter and to take advantage of new printing technologies which allowed a scale of production equal to the status of painting, previously unseen in British photography. In contrast my pictures were relatively small in the context of other works in the exhibition being one metre square, the focus not so much on scale of final presentation but in the transcription of a three dimensional space onto a two dimensional surface, forming a multiplicity of viewing points. My methods of producing still photographic work owed as much to artists such as Roberta M Graham and Holly Warburton's; in their elaborately layered tape slide sequences of the 1980s, the layering and dissolving of one image into another constructed a space and time of expanded cinema, somewhere between the still and the real time moving film or video image.

The filmmaker Peter Greenaway was also influential on my practice, particularly his interests in the manipulation of light, of the interrelationships of animals, plants and humans through an interest in natural history, landscape and painting. The main subjects of the film *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) are twins who explore the decomposition of the body and it's relationship with a time of mourning the death of a loved one.

It's related to the idea of one half seeking the other, of encountering oneself in a mirror.
(Greenaway, 2000: 30)

The two twins are also complimentary. One twin focuses on death, he studies the processes of decomposition, while the other, a lover of life, frees the animals at night. (Ciment, 2000: 37)

Along with his many references to art historical painting in this particular case Vermeer, he used highly saturated colour and light, which emanated from machines of surveillance and scanning. *A Zed and Two Noughts* explores man's relationship with his environment and his desperate attempt to use science to understand his surroundings. In his most recent work *The Last Supper* (Milan 2008), Greenaway is presenting an expanded view of cinema and a deconstruction of Leonardo Da Vinci's painting for 'the laptop generation.' Whilst heralding this approach as being completely new, it is perhaps only the technical wizardry he employs which is. He is in fact revisiting methods of production used in many installation works during the 1970s and 1980s, including my own, where sculptural objects, sound and lighting placed the viewer in an immersive position rather than the fixed perspective of the cinema screen.

The exhibition *De Composition (Constructed Photography in Britain)* was a major touring international exhibition, which reflected a shift in photographic practice during the 1980s mainly from the hands of Fine Art trained practitioners. Although there had been numerous exhibitions of constructed photographic practice in the USA and Europe, previous exhibitions in Britain such as *Mysterious Co-incidences* (Photographers' Gallery, London, 1987), *Photography Now* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1989) and *Through the Looking Glass-Photographic Art in Britain 1845-1989* (Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1989), featured in the main work by photographers, whose practice was at the time seen as separate from Fine Art.

The Touring venues for the exhibition were:

- 1998 Bulgaria, Plovdiv, International Photography Meeting
- 1998 Bulgaria, Varna, Art Gallery
- 1998 Greece, Athens, Illeana Tounda Gallery
- 1998 Greece, Thessaloniki, Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art
- 1997 Romania, Constanta, Museum of Art
- 1997 Romania, Bucharest, National Gallery
- 1997 Hungary, Budapest, Ludwig Museum
- 1997 Poland, Lodz, Museum Sztuki
- 1996 Slovakia, Bratislava, Slovak National Gallery
- 1996 Italy, San Giovanni in Monte
- 1996 Italy, Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni
- 1995 Mexico, Guadalajara, Instituto Cultural Cabanas
- 1995 Mexico, Mexico City, Centro de la Imagen
- 1994 Venezuela, Caracas, Museo de Artes Visuales Alejandro Otero
- 1992 Argentina, Buenos Aires, Cultural Centre Recoleta
- 1991 Wales, Cardiff, Oriel & Chapter (Simultaneously)

I was invited by the British Council to hold workshops in Brazil, Venezuela, Bratislava and Macedonia to develop my working methodologies with both students and the wider public. The work was purchased and is now held permanently in the British Council collection. Brett Rogers, now Director of the Photographers Gallery London, talked about the importance of the exhibition at the conference *What Happened Here* (a survey of British photography since the 1970's at Tate Britain in 2005)

Chapter Two: The Animal, Body, and Landscape.

Many recurrent themes in my practice can be sourced to two important influences in my early life, shaping my work, and persisting as a visual language to be unravelled and extended. One of the main influences has come from an exposure to surgical photography taken by my father to assist him in reconstructive surgery from the late 1960s until his retirement in 1995. His area of expertise was oral and maxillo facial surgery, and much of his extensive library of photographic imagery was either produced for educational purposes, or to demonstrate reconstructive surgery following car and other accidents. He also photographed many operations in progress—the site where the skin was opened to reveal the interior of the body. Both in the case of ‘before and after’ (surgery) portraiture taken ‘face on’, and the colour collisions of the body exposed by the surgeon’s knife and the (green) robes and sheets of the operating table saturated in Kodachrome transparencies, left an enduring visual impression. His early research attempts at imaging the interior of the face occasionally involving the firing of flash bulbs into the mouths of my mother, siblings, and myself, in order to reveal the surrounding bone and tissue, hold lasting memories of an experimental scientific approach to the photographic. The house I was brought up in was early Victorian, when purchased, filled with dozens of cases of taxidermy specimens contained in glass cases. These were all auctioned except for one stuffed woodcock— a memento of the former owner with a taste for the portable diorama.

Both human flesh, exposed, alive, and objectified, and the dead body of the animal re-presented as whole, alive, and in a naturalistic setting, formed a rich background of imagery that formed an alphabet of references I later employed as a visual artist. These fuelled my interest in what it means to be both human and animal, and our human attitudes towards animals.

John Berger in his essay *Why Look at Animals?* in the book *About Looking*, attributes the decisive break of man's relationship to animals with Descartes.

Descartes internalised, within man, the dualism implicit in the human relation to animals. In dividing absolutely body from soul, he bequeathed the body to the laws of physics and mechanics, and, since animals were soulless, the animal was reduced to the model of a machine. (Berger, 1980: 09)

He sees this reduction of the animal as a loss of an original reciprocal relationship with animals. The duality of their simultaneously being both like and unlike man, and their separateness and inseparability from man, is echoed in the methods I have employed to articulate this loss and to bring it centre-stage in various visual manifestations.

In 1993 I embarked on a series of photographs *Gone to Earth*, which became the title of a solo exhibition at the John Hansard Gallery in 1994. In addition to this main body of work and the installation discussed later, were several earlier single works, which had explored a medical relationship with the body both human and animal. *Uncharted Terrain* (fig.3) had been previously exhibited at the Anderson O'Day Gallery London, alongside new paintings by Mark Wright that explored the relationship of painting and the photographic surface. The work consisted of a series of x-ray images of computer tomography scans of

the human skull retaining the text and data from the original scans, which were printed onto photographic paper both in positive and negative. This is not immediately noticeable as this medical imagery can be ‘read’ equally well in both black and white. In *The Pencil of Nature* William Fox Talbot had talked about his photograms of lace in a similar way, ... ‘black lace being as familiar to the eye as white lace, and the object being only to exhibit the pattern with accuracy.’ (Fox Talbot, 1969: no pagination) Over this arrangement I projected a transparency of a pyramid shaped dwelling I had taken in the desert in New Mexico and subsequently re-photographed the combined images.

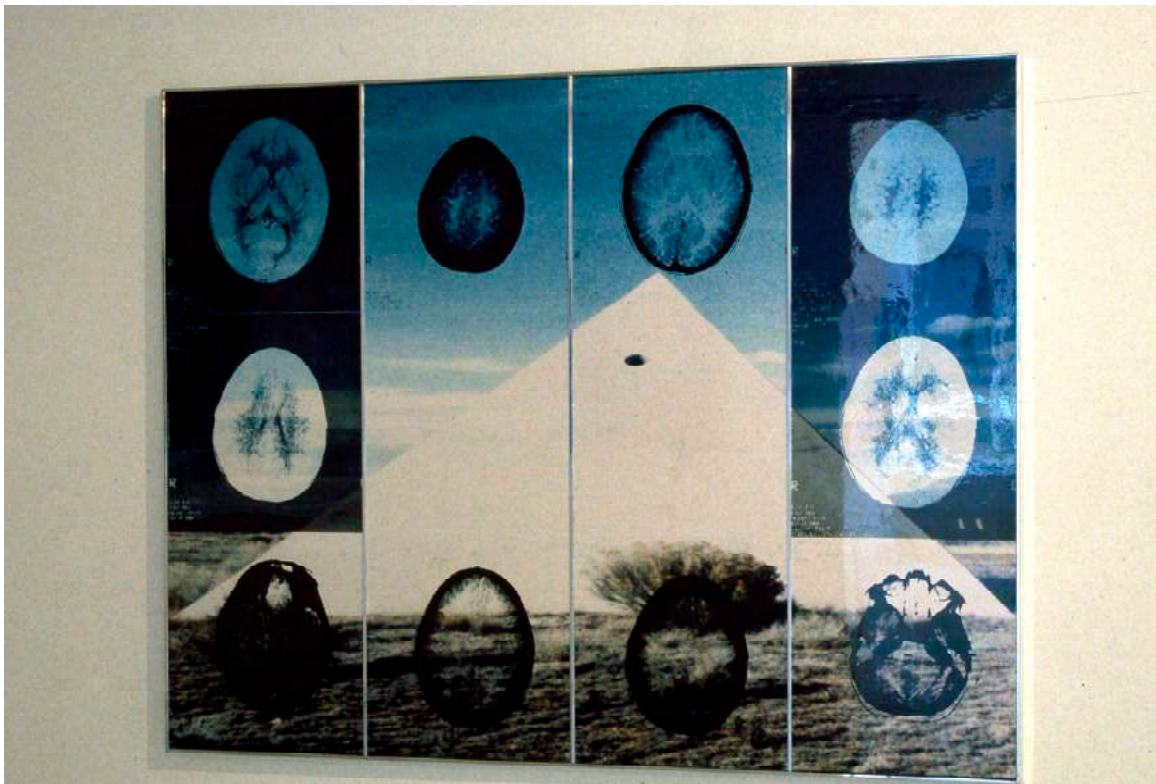


Figure 3 SEAR, H. 1992 *Uncharted Terrain* (Ctype print and aluminium)

A symbol of death is reversed so that it becomes an emblem of life... the skull undergoes dramatic changes in appearance and assumes elemental significance in different photographs to become a shimmering membrane, a black hole, a kernel, a moonrise, a cosmic egg and even a satellite—the source of life and the seat of intelligence. (Kent, 1993: 39)

The most obvious references to both the corporeal and the metaphysical are complicated in the field of the image by the effect of the scans as floating over the landscape, which is a reversal of their production and partly a result of the graphic nature of the image.

Perspective distance in the pyramid/landscape photograph is disrupted by the push and pull of the negative and positive images of the skull that produces a confusion of perspective in the image. The view is blocked by both symbols and electronic data of the human skull, itself the housing surrounding the site of vision. The images of slices of different sections of the head produced by a non invasive technology is juxtaposed with an actual dividing of the image with polished aluminium which cuts into the surface of the photograph disrupting the whole and refers to a more physical environment of the surgical.

Occasionally, one discerns features—eye sockets, nasal cavities, a hungry mouth, but these are not the ones we are familiar with. There is tenderness, fragility and vulnerability, which is entirely at odds with the calculating method of reproduction. It makes us at once, supreme and terrified.”
(Dutt, 1993: 96)

This reference to the presence of oppositions in the work leads directly to an engagement with the sublime, which I have explored in later works. Many of the key ideas and methods of production are contained in this single piece and therefore worth exploring in detail. Other pieces in the exhibition included *Severance* a diptych of a photograph my father took of my own face as a child being inscribed with marks relating to pre surgical operations and a photograph of a rocky landscape, its surface covered in dust. The two images were conjoined by a single strip of red glass sunk into the frame of the image (fig.4), exaggerating the physicality of the image/object.

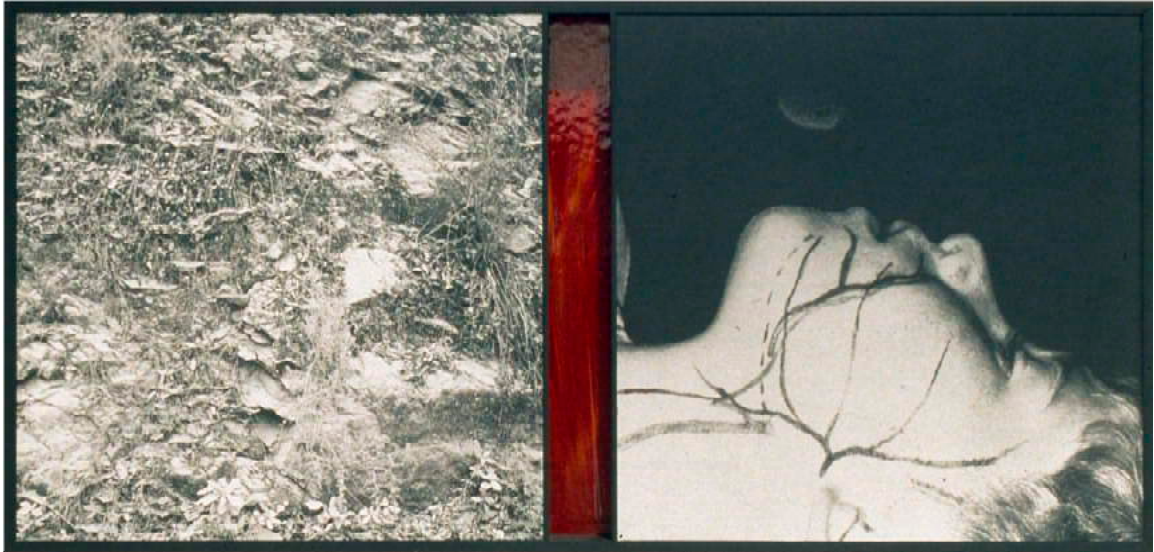


Figure 4 SEAR, H. 1993 *Severance* (Silverprint photograph, glass)

Four photographs made in 1993 during my residency at the British School at Rome, as the recipient of a three month Abbey Award, were also exhibited. (See *Gone To Earth* catalogue) This work was the result of further investigations into the sculptural and the two-dimensional surface of the image. Under the generic title of *Moments of Capture*, two of the images explored the printing of an image in black and white and its reconstruction as a sculptural object. These photo/objects like pieces of crumpled, discarded paper were further pierced with holes, and lights embedded in the image. These formed the light source for the re-photographing of the object. I developed this sculptural approach when commissioned by *Creative Camera* magazine celebrating twenty-five years of publication. In this format I was able to present both the front and the back of a photographic 'sculpture' on either side of a single sheet of paper. A three-dimensional object of a double sided photograph, was sculpted into an object, presented finally as two images *One and the Same* either side of the same page.

Both photographs were statues photographed in the gardens of the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, Italy, one of a woman with eyes closed, the other a demon gargoyle with a fountain spilling from its mouth. The dreamer and the dream exist as two sides of the same page.

(fig.5)



Figure 5 SEAR, H. 1993 *one and the same* (2 pages of *Creative Camera* magazine April/May 1993)

Gone To Earth was exhibited at Ffotogallery in Cardiff. The pictures accompanied a reconstruction of large-scale earlier work *Struck*, which had been originally shown as a backlit panorama in a shopping unit at the Tower Bridge Piazza in London. In this work two taxidermy specimens of a hare and a fox had been re-photographed as if caught in car headlights (see *Gone To Earth* catalogue.) These two animals stared at each other across a panoramic landscape of trees having fallen after the storm of 1987 photographed in Wentwood, Wales. Amorphous blue trails of light, taken over long exposures, were projected onto the black and white photograph and re-photographed, functioning as an electrical presence in the landscape. This charge formed a visual link between the hunter and the hunted. The situation of this work within a non-gallery space in the city, contributed to its reading of a collision of the natural world in the context of increasing urbanisation.

Gone To Earth was also exhibited at Portfolio Gallery in Edinburgh alongside another series of photographs titled *Covert*, which portrayed isolated thickets or shrubs in sand dunes. Concealing their interiors these landscapes held the possibility of being both potential habitats for other species while retaining associations with the female human body in particular the pubic mound. These black and white images were reconstructed in the studio by a process of re-photographing through water in which filaments of reflective matter were suspended and moving. The light source was the projector, introducing colour from other out-of-focus landscape transparencies, the long exposures resulting in the recording of a much subtler presence of light trails within the image. Although the water was invisible its presence was felt with the suspension of the sparks

of light within the images more akin to the flashes of colour and light described by Goethe (Crary, 1999: 68) as emanating from the body rather than the penetration of technological surveillance. (fig.6)



Figure 6 SEAR, H. 1995. *Covert* (Ctype Print)

In response to the limitations I perceived in *Struck*, of an almost literal reading of the image across a two dimensional plane, I proceeded to photograph a series of taxidermy specimens as if they were landscapes, returning to a more direct involvement with the thickness of the image through a process of layering (fig.7). Originally photographed in 35mm black and white, the images were then mounted and punctured with a series of LED² lights, their positioning in the skin of the image based on various map references. The intention was to produce two viewing distances for the spectator, one of seeing the image as if it was an aerial photograph, or flying at night over a landscape and looking down at the small points of light emitted from houses and street lights the, other being the extreme close up as the viewer approached the image s/he was brought:

Close enough to ruffle one's fur, graze one's hide, catch a whisker-just where sight cedes to touch in the proximate space of the body, and the periphery of vision is shadowed over by skin, sunk behind bone. (Butler1995: 04)

² Light Emitting Diode



Figure 7 SEAR, H. 1994 *Gone To Earth* (Ctype print)

The colour projected onto these led punctured images was taken from a catalogue of slide transparencies of landscapes, from other locations and times, making a renewed appearance in the work; shedding a 'past' light into the present. The slides of former landscapes were projected out of focus to diffuse the light and obscure its source. This had the effect of 'painting' the black and white images with coloured light or ghosts of previous landscapes. As projected colour they became a light in opposition to daylight and as such resisted a conventional topographic source. This light was akin to the light of projected celluloid associated with cinema. The object was then re-photographed, the puncturing of the surface finally sealed within the photographs surface. This was a development from a previous work *The Surface Beneath 1991* (Arts Council of England collection) where the lights were physically present in the artwork inviting the viewer to

contemplate what might exist behind or beyond the surface of both image and object.

(fig.8)



Figure 8 SEAR, H. 1991 *The Surface Beneath* (Ctype Print and LED lights)

The lights embedded in the photographed skin of the animal refer to a technological surveillance of the body where the skin is no longer the boundary between private and public. Microsurgery can investigate beneath the surface of the skin with minimal penetration, miniature cameras can explore the previously unseen, and surgical operations function at a distance removed from the body by technology. In *Gone To Earth* the surface of the image had been touched twice, once violated with a puncturing of the surface and a gentler caress of the projected light onto the black and white image— the two fixed in the same space through the act of rephotographing.

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... Following on Jeffrey Deitch's 1993 exhibition *Post Human*, 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. (Faure-Walker, 1995: 56-57)

Central to the work was its relation to the imaginary and the idea of escape. In Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, the barbarian Jewel takes the professor's daughter Marianne from her white tower of steel and concrete, an enclosed cultivated, controlling community guarded by soldiers, into an exotic visceral wilderness beyond the boundaries and constraints of her previous existence. It is in this beyond space that she is allowed to indulge her wilder fantasies. Elaine Showalter borrows a term 'wild zone' from cultural anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener to indicate women's space as a muted area within dominant male discourse.

For some feminist critics, the wild zone or 'female space', must be the address of a genuinely women-centred criticism, theory and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak. (Showalter, 1981: 324)

As a visual artist it is this zone of beyond or behind that I have attempted to picture as a means of self-understanding, while being aware that my practice is not outside of culture but rather as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik state in their book *Landscapes of Desire*; 'poised on the border between dominant culture and the 'wild zone'.' (They are examining texts which query the social construction of femininity, Horner and Zlosnik. 1990: 08.)

In the same exhibition I presented an installation which visualised the presence of the human body utilising found ultrasound scans, the first imaging of our unborn selves, and a sculptural construction of a suspended Perspex sheet into which were embedded hundreds of LED lights mapped out as the frontal acupuncture points of a human figure.

Sear reinstates the body with all its sensorial weight, its visceral matter, to a position that provokes questions of how medicine plays a formative role in defining a sense of one's own body. (Roberts, 1995: 16)

The panoramic presentation of the ultrascan projections on a large curved wall in the gallery, echoed the construction of nineteenth century dioramas of the dead animal body, where the central viewing position allowed the consumption of a maximum field of information and confirmed a human superiority over the natural world. Crucially the surface of these ultrascan images had been scratched and damaged and the emulsion of the image marked and erased by their contact with a physical surface (they were originally found discarded in the street and had probably been walked upon). These marks when projected drew the viewer's attention to the substance of the transparency and when enlarged became reminiscent of landscapes, mountains or snowstorms, or the visual noise of an un-tuned television screen; of an outer space depicting an inner surveillance.

The slides were projected through the Perspex screen, having the effect of casting a shadow of the complex wiring of the LED lights onto the projection. These shadows had an appearance similar to early anatomy drawings, connecting the first visualisations of the body through post-mortem examination, with contemporary invisible incursions into the body, both present within the surface of the projection. New technologies afford visualisations of the deepest recesses of our bodies and with these visualisations pose new challenges in locating the self and its boundaries. The physical body was evident in images of flesh and fur in the photographs of the animals but replaced by a process of mapping of the human body in the installation. The construction of the work was 'hand made' using old technologies, claiming subjectivity often absent in the dissolution of the body through the distancing and invisibility of new medical technologies.

A key work in the exhibition was a pair of light boxes picturing photographs of my eyes held in shadow (fig.9). The eyes had been ‘blinded’ or rather because attention is drawn to the skin surrounding the eye the black-hole becomes a void dragging the viewer into their own body. A yellow gel was used to enhance the colour of the skin around the eye and when back-lit the colour and light fused to produce a sun-like effect. The intensity of yellow light functioned in direct opposition to the black shadow of the eye socket and encapsulated the co-dependence of both blindness and sight in the act of seeing.



Figure 9 SEAR, H. 1994 *Untitled* (Light Boxes)

The field of vision appears to be seamless, but it is shot through with holes. I look at a naked body and I fail to see entire limbs, I look at a landscape and I do not notice whole mountains. Perhaps ordinary vision is less like a brightly lit sky with one blinding spot in it than the night sky filled with stars. Maybe we see only little spots against a field of darkness. (Elkins, 1997: 206)

This ‘self portrait’ acted as a visual sign at the entrance to the installation space, depicting an ambition to draw attention to that which is unseeable and therefore resistant to surveillance. This was an important piece in the development of the work *Twice ... Once*, 1998-2000. Shortly after the completion of this work in 1995, I began to access and work

directly with the computer as the recipient of a residency at Oxford Brookes University to extend my practice through utilising digital technologies.

Grounded, a series of animal landscapes were started in 2000 and were first exhibited at Zinc gallery in Stockholm under the title of *Unsettlement*. Each picture was constructed from two separate photographic images, one of skies, the other of the back of animal specimens in natural history museums (fig.10). The hides of the animals appear to reflect the various atmospheric conditions of the skies contributing to the first impression that these pictures were made by one stroke of the camera's shutter.

These are metaphorical geographies, they engage with the psyche. Unsettling and sensual, their romanticism is both surreal and suggestive. Wanting to sink into the fur you find yourself brought up against the surface of the photographic print. These memento mori terrains seem to exude life and promise, yet they are also about denial; the skins a mirage, dreamscapes of interiority, mythical places. (Wainwright 2000: 25)

The relationship of the body to the sky is simultaneously split and conjoined as with the human sensual body and the cerebral mind.



Figure 10 SEAR, H. 2000 *Grounded No.15* (Lambda print)

Helen Sears' work relates to and references the modernist trope of the sky, but goes beyond that to include within this sphere the animal and animalist: the beautiful and the sublime are both included together...

And in the infinite space of the sky and the specificity of the body under it, dreams open up. Not the dreams of animals, but the animality of dreams: the unconscious and its' sexuality. (Bate, 2002: 53)

The construction of the image is not as visually invasive as with the punctured skins in *Gone To Earth*: the two elements of the picture conjoined in the computer, to present a

plausible landscape. A landscape of the picturesque implies a taming or control, but in the sublime, desire is not controlled. By framing of the images to include only the bellies and backs, the particularities of the species are negated, and refer to a generic animality. The animal landscapes of *Gone To Earth* overtly acknowledged technology as being embedded in the picture, whereas these virtual landscapes appear at first glance to be referring to photography's window on to the world. *Gone to Earth* presented the animal body as an ambiguous dark presence, while in *Grounded*, the bright light and forensic control of the computer screen, allowed the technological to be camouflaged or hidden. Another important issue in the work was the 'freeing' of the animal body from the constraints of the museum display case and all the cultural baggage and voyeurism attached to the nineteenth century diorama. Placing the animal body back into the landscape shifted the power balance back in favour of the animal.

The re-balancing of power between animal and human was also explored in the ten images that make up the series *Still... A landscape in ten parts*. These photographs were extracted from one medium-format negative, of an alpine diorama, shot in the museum of natural history in Darmstadt. (Fig. 11 a, b, and c)



Figure 11a,b, and c SEAR, H. 2002 *Still...a landscape in ten parts* (Lambda Prints)

Helen Sear has taken that ultimate in still life display, the natural history museum diorama, to make works in which the artifice becomes real - sprung from their traps of deadness, the animals and birds that she shows against the grey alpine rocks become alive in their stillness. (Williams, 2006: 07)

Disrupting the consumption of the ‘whole’ scene, tactics have been employed to relocate the viewer, framing individual dramas and staged exchanges between the different animals. The process of enlarging each fragment to over one metre square resulted in a breaking up or ‘noise’ on the surface of the photograph that echoed previous strategies to draw attention to the surface and substance of the image. It’s retinal effect served as a potential for the re-animation of the taxidermy specimens.

This strategy of fragmentation, both of the original negative, and the exposure of the pixel/grain, was used to reposition the viewer, and restrict the consumption of the whole diorama of the museum. To some extent the very nature of the nineteenth century diorama is imbued with the idea of camouflage, but it is not the animals, which are camouflaged, but the whole presentation of these impossible scenes as reality, hides the true purpose of their display—the power relations inherent in institutions such as the museum. Still-life, landscape and portraiture are all alluded to in the work, that attempts to break down the boundaries of genre photography. One of the key issues in this work is the connection between the realism associated with both photography, and the diorama: both of which are being challenged in the making of the work. The diorama is dependent on a trompe l’oeil effect, combining painted backdrops, real objects, and stuffed animals, where we suspend our disbelief and imagine a ‘real’ panoramic view. Likewise the veracity associated with the photographic image.

Given their sculptural and painterly components, Helen Sears’ work in these series can be positioned, perhaps surprisingly to some, between the gentle incursions in a landscape rendered by Hamish Fulton that pass without a trace and then the archaeological and sociological constructions of Mark Dion that investigate the social constructions of nature and our place in the world. Such a position places Sears’ work in a critical space it has not entered before in writing but these works undoubtedly lead there... The results are scenes alive with activity where multiple acts unfold on a stage that never escapes being haunted by the shadow of a crime. (Slyce, 2002: 65)

Light seeking Transparency is a two - screen video installation first projected as part of the exhibition *Hide 2003*, and depicts an image being hunted by its source. Made from three slides, a projector, some model trees, and a turntable, the work explores the possibility of splitting a single image into two scenarios. The projected images of a fox, a hare and an owl are photographed from taxidermy specimens. Lit and photographed to appear as if caught in car headlights, the three specimens are bathed in the primary colours of red, blue, and yellow, which as light, become aligned to the artificial or technological. Focussing the video camera firstly on the single 'eye' of the projector, and secondly the glass eye of the projected image of the animal, the piece places the viewer in a position, where both the source of the image, and the image, are simultaneously within their visual field. Where the light of the projector blinds, the other eye is re-vivified, both by the movement of the hand-held camera, and the illusion that the light reflected in the image of the eye is caused by the projector. There is a sense of threat or danger from the light behind the trees, but the threat will never be fully realised, as a distance is necessary for the projector to project. While nature and technology look one another in the eye, they are simultaneously co-dependant, and separated.

The screens shift between the colours red yellow and blue and in doing so enact a Benjaminian return to the incunabula of photography in the C19th and the crashing confluence of nature, culture, and technology unleashed in the jewel-like wonder of the stereoscopic daguerreotype. (Slyce, 2002: 65)

Light seeking Transparency was originally commissioned by ARTLAB at Imperial College London and was originally shown on two separate monitors in 2002.

(fig.12)

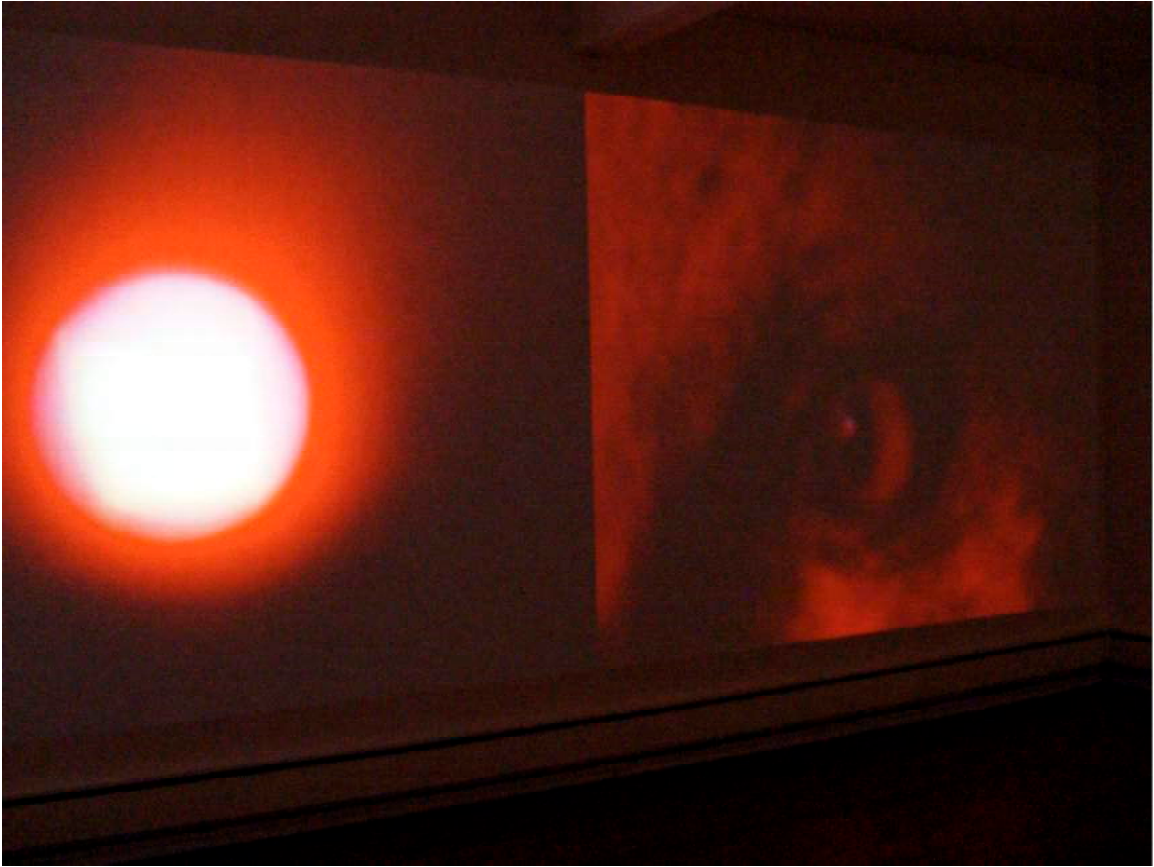


Figure 12. SEAR, H 2003 *Light Seeking Transparency* (Video installation Ffotogallery Wales)



Figure 13 SEAR, H. 2004 *Spot* (Lambda Prints) Installation Castellon de la Plana Spain.

The series *Spot 2003* (fig.13) was the result of an eighteen-month commission for the Yard Gallery and Nottingham Museum and Castle working with the natural history collection at Wollaton Hall an Elizabethan stately home and one of the first British natural history museums. The commission was offered in direct response to the impact of *Gone to Earth* and *Grounded*. Research into the collections and wider implications of the museum had previously been developed through two exhibitions and a bookwork, *The Whole Story*, commissioned and published by Photoworks in 2000.

Narrowing my subject to the British bird collection I made connections between the specimens and the site where they were housed, choosing to photograph the birds in the style of society portraiture, giving them equal status with those on display in the main Hall. Referring to the Elizabethan portrait painters, in particular Nicholas Hilliard, I introduced a decorative fringing, made from images of trees, photographed from the ground looking up at the sky. These were a direct reference to the highly detailed rendering of costume, ruffs, and jewellery worn by his sitters. Two viewing points were once again combined within one picture. In the first, the camera was pointed horizontally, facing the profile of the bird at the same height, acknowledging equality with the subject, in the second, a vertical trajectory was used. Re constructed in the computer, the difference between the 'naturalistic' colour of the subject, and the flat (sampled colour) of the trees and the occluded eye, resulted in a disruption of perception across the surface of the combined image. Photography's inherent relationship to painting is expanded through the use of Photoshop where digital colour is made up of individual units (pixels),

to be sampled like commercially produced paint, whereas analogue 'photographic' colour is a continuum, a seamless spectrum of one colour merging into the next as in a rainbow.

The death of the specimen, and its subsequent display, already acknowledges the loss articulated by John Berger in our human relations with these birds, and with it, the power and authority of the museum and similar institutions I have used as a basis for my research.

The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary. The same animal may well look at another species in the same way. He does not reserve a special look for man. But by no other species except man will the animal's look be recognised as familiar. Other animals are held by the look. Man becomes aware of himself returning the look. (Berger, 1980: 02)

The occlusion of the eye was a direct response to the glass eye, which replaces the eye of the taxidermy specimen, the only part of the bird, which does not survive the process. It is also the only point of similarity that as humans we share. We still see ourselves reflected in the glass eye of the specimen even though it is dead, and in order to emphasise this I wanted to cover the eye, forcing the viewer to look again at the strange otherness of these creatures.

... the key issue is it's figured illusion that refusing to meet one's eye is an action on the part of the birds not the artist. This show may be a perceptual exposition that exposes a subconscious hierarchy of vision, but it doesn't feel like one. Instead the work anticipates and teases out a latent nightmare scenario of total alienation from, and non-superiority to, nature amid a welter of collapsing taxonomical restraints and, in doing so plants a flag at the previously unmapped midpoint between Alfred Hitchcock and Mark Dion. More importantly the work upends analyses of the gaze which position looking (and photographing) as a one-way street. (Herbert, 2003: 21)

This work, although initially site-specific, transcended the particularities of place to be exhibited as part of the group exhibition *La Mirada Reflexiva* at Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castello, Castellon de la Plana, Spain. The exhibition brought together

works by the old master painters Zurbaran, Juan de Juanes and Jusepe de Ribera with contemporary pieces by Robert Longo, Perejaume and myself to consider ideas of the pictorial in photographic media. The parallel text in the *Spot* catalogue written by Stuart Cameron, explored notions of heritage, hunting, trophy collecting, and reality TV, which, rather than explain the work, opened up a broader dialogue, functioning an invitation to the viewer, to make connections between image and text, rather than place one or the other within a fixed discourse.

Gone To Earth was originally exhibited in a solo exhibition at The John Hansard Gallery Southampton, and subsequently presented alongside other bodies of work in four further solo exhibitions:

1995 Derby, Montage Gallery

1995 Edinburgh, Portfolio Gallery

1999 York, Impressions Gallery *Between There and Now*

2003 Cardiff, Ffotogallery

The work was featured in A and D magazine *The Contemporary Sublime* 1995 and contextualised in an essay 'Spellbound' in Portfolio Magazine by Caryn Faure-Walker.

The accompanying catalogue featured texts by Russell Roberts and Susan Butler.

Grounded was originally exhibited in the solo exhibitions *Unsettlement* at Zinc Gallery Stockholm and *Grounded* at Impressions Gallery York and subsequently in parts in 7 subsequent exhibitions:

2000 Germany, Gottingen Galerie Ahlers *Tierisch*

2000 Germany, Darmstadt Axel Thieme Galerie

2001 Cambridge, Kettles Yard Gallery *Solid State*

2001 USA, New York Fredereike Taylor Gallery *Gone Missing*

2002 London, Gasworks Gallery *Unscene*

2003 London, VTO Gallery *Land Escape*

2005 Leeds, Metropolitan Gallery

Still A Landscape in ten parts was reviewed in the Guardian newspaper. August 21st

2003 by Alfred Hickling, and featured in *Stilled: Contemporary Still Life Photography by*

Women, published by IRIS and Ffotogallery Wales 2006. The series was exhibited at:

2003 York Impressions Gallery *Grounded*

2003 Wales Ffotogallery *Hide*

2005 Leeds Metropolitan Gallery

Spot was exhibited at:

2003 Nottingham, Yard Gallery

2003 Cardiff, Ffotogallery *Hide*

2005 Spain, Espai D'Art Contemporani de Castello, *La Mirada Reflexiva*

2006 Italy, Florence FSM Gallery *Landed*

2008/2009 London, Unit 2 Gallery Whitechapel, Plymouth Arts Centre and Museum *The Animal Gaze*

Chapter Three: Collapsing Distance, Extending Time.

In this section I will describe two bodies of work, *Twice... Once* and *Inside the View*

Twice... Once (1998-2000) started as an exploration into the space/distance between myself, and my mirror image, and that in recognizing oneself, a split has occurred between the self and it's mirror double (fig.14). It is impossible to see your eyes unless you look into a mirror, and the interior self is constantly reaching out to the world to find meaning. The body of work took the self-portrait light boxes in *Gone to Earth* as a starting point, exploring the limitations of photographic portraiture, and its tendency to focus on surface detail. My understanding of the work developed in parallel with it's making, returning to the dark room and analogue methods of production. Over a two year period I photographed over fifty friends and acquaintances invited to my studio in Bethnal Green, London.

Photographing each subject twice, with one direct light similar to the format of a passport photo, the subsequent negatives were sandwiched together, fixed at the edges. In the dark room, the edges of the curved negatives touched the photographic paper, the furthest distance from the paper having been the nearest point to the camera. Using the methods usually reserved for contact printing, when a negative is made positive through contact with the photographic paper, I made 'non' contact prints, about twenty or thirty per image. The precision involved in printing from a standard negative, was undermined

by the precariously balanced structure (double negative), producing different variations at each exposure. The final selection of images was based on a perceived balance in the image, between the deep shadow and palest areas, and the point of dissolution of the exterior features of the face. The catch light in the eyes was obliterated through the process, shadow areas becoming doubly dark, which produced the illusion of grossly dilated pupils, commonly occurring during sexual arousal, in darkness, or through chemical stimulation. The blackened eyes, presented a void through which the viewer might be aware of being sucked into the interior space of the portraits, and by association, their own bodies. These faces hovered between the sensuous and the haunted, live subjects as death masks. Freud's uncanny and Lacan's term 'extimite' which blurs a distinct line between interiority and exteriority, the result of which causes anxiety, is explored by Mladen Dolar in his text for *I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night.: Lacan and the Uncanny*, (Dolar, 1991: 5-23).³ The individual external characteristics of each sitter are blurred and effectively erased by this process and reminiscent of gender ambiguous automata. The photographs referenced technology and had the final appearance of computer-generated images, but it was the hand-made element in the work, which accounted for its unique and original appearance.

Valerie Reardon talks about the act of enlarging of images to eliminate detail as in Boltanski's blow-ups taken from anonymous group photographs but comments that his pictures bear the mark of the grain of the image, whereas the in Twice... Once

³ This fascinating text explores relationships between the double, automatons and Frankenstein's Creature, and the attempt of the Enlightenment to provide a link between matter and spirit, nature and culture.

Sear's images have smooth, thick, velvety surfaces, which are so sensually appealing they not only suggest interiority but also actually elicit a desire to penetrate or incorporate them in some way. (Reardon, 1998: 40)

The two negatives one taken shortly after the other have caught the sitters face in a slightly different position and it is this slight shift which allows the image to almost reverberate or appear to be in a state of dissolving momentum.

There are similarities with the work of Roni Horn's *Becoming a Landscape* 1999. In this work she has paired images of hot-water geysers taken seconds apart.

In that brief tick in time (perhaps only seconds) stated in the paired image and through the space formed between the pair you enter the work. The viewer is teased into the view. This is the point where something becomes too complex or too elusive to be itself only. Landscape resides somewhere in this space. (Detheridge, 2006: 93)

The relationship to the viewing body and the landscape as alive is present in Horns work, in particular the eyes, as these cavernous holes in the Icelandic landscape are presented in adjacent pairs. They are both reminiscent of *Untitled* eyes held in shadow from 1994 and also explore the photographing of more than one image seconds apart as with the sitters in *Twice... Once*. The time lapse between each photograph is displayed one beside the other in Horns work whereas in *Twice... Once* the separate images are placed on top of one another.

In Patrick Tosani's series of photographs, *Portraits*, 1984/1985, his subjects are rendered almost totally unrecognisable, through unfocussing the camera. They have been projected onto Braille paper and re-photographed resulting in a double denial in the work. If the viewer is sighted s/he cannot see the figure as a recognisable individual and if blind s/he would be unable to read the Braille, as it is merely illusion embedded in the surface of the

photographic print. The importance of this work in relation to my own is the inclusion of the apparatus of the camera as a central subject in the work. Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Darwin, constructed composite portrait photographs made to illustrate an optical-statistical model of society based on moral hierarchies. DNA testing and retinal scanning form the current basis of proof of identity rather than the visible typologies associated with eugenics.



Figure 14 SEAR, H. 1998-2000 *Twice...Once* (Installation View Angel Row Gallery Nottingham 1999)

Sear makes a composite portrait in a process not unlike Galton's. The distortions thus produced suggest that identity is malleable, fugitive, ephemeral... Blank cavernous eyes and slits of mouths evoke, but refuse connection, between 'I' and 'you'. (Faure Walker, 2003: 90)

I would suggest that any distortion through process in *Twice... Once* points to a refusal to be identified and therefore categorised, and I am picturing sites where the visible and the invisible emerge from and are bound to one other on the same surface.

At the same time making of the series *Twice...Once* I turned the camera on myself to construct three self-portraits. Holding a small 35mm compact camera at arms length I photographed my face both with eyes closed and looking directly into the lens. Scanning and cropping the resulting print I enlarged the scale of the image to over one metre square in the computer. I then dissected the image into a grid of numbered squares. Printing each three-inch square out on a domestic inkjet printer I developed a process of transferring ink from the paper print to a semi-transparent plastic surface resembling skin. These individual squares were then transferred onto a transparent Perspex support.

Sequencing the three works drew attention to a transformation from the first 'angelic' (eyes closed and all other features bathed in light) to a direct gaze in the second, and finally to a much darker more monstrous apparition where both eyes appear radically different, one lit the other in shadow. (fig.15)



Figure 15 SEAR, H. 2000 *Untitled Self Portrait* (Inkjet on Perspex)

She restores her face by pasting the squares back in order. It is the tension between the hand's re-making and technology's dissection of the image that visibly underlines what Kristeva calls the foreignness of 'ourselves to ourselves.'
(Faure-Walker, 2003: 90)

A forensic approach to the self, connected elements of the fragmentation of space explored in *Natural Habitat*, and references to medical surveillance in *Gone To Earth*. Echoing methods of cataloguing and the piecing together of smaller elements to create a 'whole', these portraits had similarities to both museum displays and also to the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Inside The View began as an investigation into the alpine landscape and the philosophical concerns centred on the eighteenth century sublime and the Grand Tour in literature, as a gendered sensation, and how I might evaluate these ideas through Fine Art practice. I wanted to explore where a contemporary sublime might be located and whether the feminine problematised the concept of the sublime. I used photography, video and digital media to construct and re-present a series of images that subverted notions of landscape as a topographical document or panoramic whole. The inter-relationships between touch and vision, distance and proximity, were of particular interest as was the placing of myself within the landscape. The eighteenth century Russian traveller Karamzin found that from an aesthetic point of view, viewing a particular waterfall in the high Alps was a complete failure as his observation was too far removed and made no impression. He had a scaffold erected to be literally beside the falling water to experience its power. Photographic practice is almost always concerned with the point of view of the camera and the photographer. The relationship between perceiver and perceived and the combination of observation with self-observation characterises much of the travel writing associated with the sublime and in particular the exploration of the Alps. My intention

with this work was to explore ideas of being both immersed in and merging with the surroundings— a symptom of the sublime feeling. I had already noticed that through the employment of new technologies and particularly the digital camera that in some cases the subject is literally touched by the laser beam mechanism of recording distance and automating focus, which begins to collapse the distance between subject and viewer typified in analogue photography. Perhaps it is within the miniature and the invisibility of technology, as opposed to the vastness of the natural panorama that the sublime can now be located.

Landscape photography has always been surrounded by amongst others, gender issues, and historically, predominantly male photographers have claimed it as their domain. The *Viral Landscapes* of Helen Chadwick (1988/89) explored landscapes and their relation to the human body and its microscopic interior, as did Jo Spence using her own naked body within the landscape to challenge stereotypes associated with feminine beauty. *Inside The View* continues the history of the relationship of landscape and the feminine through ideas of immersion. The process I employed to explore this, combined an element of touch or drawing in the work that both wove the two separate images together. Initially using myself as subject in the work both photographs were taken in the same location: the Morteratsch Glacier in the Swiss Alps. I developed a double time of image making, one being the instant of the taking of the photographs, and the other their subsequent reconstruction through touch and the labour of the hand, signalling a return to a more primitive and bodily experience. Extending the location of the landscapes from the glacier and the Alpine landscape of the nineteenth century sublime, I developed this

approach by photographing other subjects (women) from behind, revealing the head and shoulders. The figures and landscapes are taken in different geographic locations and the enmeshing of the two, in the digital space of the computer, explored the possibility of being simultaneously in more than one place at any one time.

The line drawing or more particularly line erasing took the loose form of an activity associated with a handicraft such as sewing or hand woven lace making. In his essay *Electricity Made Visible* Geoffrey Batchen makes connections with the Jacquard lace making loom, Samuel Morse's first electric telegraph instrument and a photogenic drawing of a piece of lace sent by Henry Fox Talbot to Charles Babbage in 1839. His broader argument is that the photographic process had from its beginnings crossed paths with the development of the computer and new media. Jacquard cards invented in 1804 by Joseph Marie Jacquard. These were essentially cards with holes punched in them to automate the looms through a binary system of pushing the threads up and down. Babbage writes about the history of his own thinking in relation to the loom and Ada Lovelace describes the imagined effects of Babbage's Analytical Engine in 1843 "weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves". (Batchen, 2006: 32) This relates directly to Fox Talbot's lace. Ada Lovelace had understood the concepts of the analytical engine as something other than just mathematical but it's potential for symbolic manipulation using rules. She had seen the Jacquard loom on tour of factories with her mother and in the romantic tradition of her father Lord Byron she sees relationships between the study of mathematics poetry and metaphysics as developed in Batchen's essay.

The woman turning her head to face the opposite view from the camera becomes a block to our view of the landscape, and we stand beside her or behind her, looking in the same direction. One picture superimposed over the other, the hidden image gradually appeared through the process of erasure as a net floating on the surface of the image. The net appears as a presence but is also simultaneously an absence. In the process of drawing, the line is usually used to describe a form or is the dividing edge between figure and ground, but in the case of this virtual drawing/erasure (I use the term drawing here as the software Photoshop uses 'brushes and pencils' in its virtual tool box, and I am holding a pen in my hand which contacts a drawing tablet) the image of the landscape appears **inside** the line. The line is the image. Figure and ground have become enmeshed and the perspective distance in the image has been brought to the surface of the eye. The German word for retina is *Netzhaut*. In Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* 1844 he (Talbot) compares the glass plate of the camera to the 'eye' of the instrument and the sensitised paper as the 'retina'. He is explaining that the camera appears to make a picture of what it 'sees'. *Inside The View* (fig.16) can also be seen to demonstrate connections with the earliest photographic experiments through new technologies. Whilst drawing the net another space had opened up, that between where my hand was contacting the drawing pad and where the line was appearing on the screen of the computer. The distance between the hand's contact with the pen and the place the drawing appeared on the screen had the effect of bringing both the sense of seeing and the sense of touch closer together as one is totally reliant upon the other in this activity. In the darkroom the sense of touch and location becomes heightened whereas in front of the computer I was seeing what my hand was simultaneously doing; but in another place. As I was engaged in the first

laborious actions of drawing the net I would make mistakes similar to dropping a thread in knitting or making an irregular stitch in sewing. Instead of undoing the mistake I would enhance my mistake with further erasure. The resultant spots caused an additional visual noise in the image, which became similar to the ‘floaters’ or blind spots, which appear when small parts of the retina have been dislodged. The title of the work refers to a series of visible poems *A L’Interieur de la Vue* by Max Ernst in 1931.



Figure 16 SEAR, H. 2004 *Inside The View no.1* (Lambda Print)

Another aspect of the software Photoshop is its relationship with old technologies and its imitation of the 'failings' of these old technologies through the application of filters. These filters take the form of a whole host of effects normally associated with earlier concrete forms of printing, drawing and painting, the options for the addition of surface noise through enlarged grain or dust and scratches is particularly interesting in relation to analogue photography. The appeal of these add-on effects are based on a nostalgia for the past: most representational photography acquires increased interest through the passing of time, but I would like to suggest that embedded in these effects is an acknowledgment of the physicality of the image, the presence of a piece of grit or dust in the film projector gate, or a scratch on the photographic negative, all signal their existence in a material world and therefore brings a sense of reassurance both in the imperfections of lived experience and existence itself.

Rosalind Krauss discusses an alternative approach to modernist's models of vision, which are relevant to, and informed this series of work in particular. She describes a beat, rhythm or pulse an on/off, on/off which functions against the stability of visual space and has the power to decompose and dissolve the coherence of form upon which visuality may be thought to depend. She describes a Max Ernst illustration from 1930 *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil* which both conjures up the effect of an illusion, the zoetrope in this instance, at the same time as exposing to view the means of the illusions production. The viewer therefore occupies two places simultaneously.

The double effect of both having the experience and watching oneself have it from the outside characterized the late nineteenth century fascination with the spectacle in which there was produced a sense of being captured not so much by the visual itself as by what one would call the visuality effect. (Krauss, 1988: 58)

She continues to expand on the double vantage point in relation to the dream and the experience of the dreamer in Ernst's work, as being witness to a scene on a stage upon which he himself was acting so that the dreamer is both protagonist within and viewer outside the screen of his or her vision.

The beat or the pulse of the zootropic field unites the experience of being both inside and out:

... the flicker of its successive images acting as the structural equivalent of the flapping wings of the interior illusion, the beat both constructing the gestalt and undoing it at the same time. (Krauss, 1988 p.59)

Rosalind Krauss is describing a drawing/collage of an object, which required the momentum of the hand to complete the illusion and in this sense the hand drawing/erased element of the construction of *Inside The View* functions in a similar way. The new technology of the computer renders the flicker or pulse of the screen almost invisible to the human eye and it is this invisibility I am attempting to excavate and represent, to show the effects of the hand in exposing the way the software programme functions and in so doing expose the presence of the screen to reveal that which normally remains hidden.

Twice... Once was initially exhibited at Anderson O'Day Gallery in London (1998) and subsequently at Angel Row in Nottingham (1999), Zelda Cheatle Gallery London (2000) and more recently included in the group exhibition *Face: The Death of the Photographic Portrait* at the Hayward Gallery London (2004). The exhibition toured to Portugal and Switzerland and featured other artists such as Orlan Cindy Sherman Martin Parr and Andy Warhol. A 2000 page publication, *Face: The New Photographic Portrait* by Thames and Hudson was launched in French, English and Italian (3 separate editions) at Paris Photo in 2006.

Inside The View was developed during a one-month artist in residence fellowship in Finland awarded by the Arts Council and The International Photography Research Network from the University of Sunderland. The work was initially conceived in another series *Touching Images* funded by an AHRB grant in 2004. This work was exhibited in Tarbes France at *Centre Le Parvis*. I was an invited speaker at the IPRN Symposium in Sunderland in 2005 and the series to date has been exhibited at Gallerie Harmonia (Centre for Creative Photography) in Jyvaskyla Finland to coincide with the international photography conference, *Shifts* in 2006. The work was also exhibited by Zelda Cheatle gallery at Photo London in 2005 and featured in *Photoworks Journal Winter/Spring 2005/2006* with text by David Campany. The completed series will be exhibited in New York at Klompching Gallery USA in January 2009.

Chapter Four: Piercing The Pixel and Excavating Colour

In this chapter I will expand on two works made in the last year that will be exhibited in G39 Gallery Cardiff. They demonstrate the continuing and recurrent explorations of perception vision, the analogue lens and the digital screen. I will also elaborate on the role of colour in my work.

Display (2007) began as a series of digital photographs taken in La Specola, the natural history museum in Florence, of a single room containing glass cabinets of taxidermy specimens of birds. La Specola is renowned not only for its world famous human anatomy waxworks but for its purpose built display cabinets and one of the bird rooms is covered from floor to ceiling on all four walls with a free standing display case in the centre of the room. This arrangement results in the viewer experiencing a complex and fragmentary experience of both reflection and deflection, which both reveal and conceal the specimens and disrupt a clear point of view. It is constantly necessary to reposition oneself in order to avoid the reflected glare of the fluorescent lighting in the panes of glass. Some birds are revealed in reflections from behind across the room and others hidden by refracted light. This sense of disorientation has the effect of animation almost as if a bird had hopped from one branch to another display case. My experience of being present in the room was similar to the photographic space I constructed in the *Natural Habitat* series from 1990. The room already fragmented through reflection suggested a re-investigation using a counter approach: an excavation of the image as opposed to projecting and layering images into a space. Using a high-resolution digital camera I

photographed the room from various viewpoints. The juxtaposition of the grid of the display cabinets and the animal bodies was similar to the duality contained within the animal landscapes in *Grounded*.

Display was the first name given to the software programme Photoshop invented by the brothers Thomas and John Knoll and also refers to the display cabinets in the museum. The title also refers to the brightly coloured feathers and courtship rituals of the living birds. My intention was to explore these connections through a distortion of Photoshop's Auto Colour correct function. The main role of this function is to normalise the photographic image and perfect its imbalances. I wanted to push this function to a limit whereby it would reveal its operation on the surface of the image— to explore the thickness of the image by cutting into its surface on the screen to expose colour, encoded, but unseen. The unmanipulated pictures were already complex, figure and ground confused by the reflective surfaces of the glass cabinets in addition to the abundance of specimens contained within them. Referring to cubist paintings of Juan Gris and Picasso I selected a diamond shaped template for both its reference to a distorted pixel and also its relationship with the notion of camouflage and the disruption of the body. Each diamond shape was delineated individually and activated through Photoshop to colour correct the area of the image contained within the diamond. An area equivalent to half the photograph was colour corrected in this way producing a decorative patchwork quilt effect. This process served to de-construct both the imagery and the medium, breaking photographic perspective and challenging the experience of the viewer. (fig.17)

There is a double attempt at re-animation both of the taxidermy specimens and the relatively inanimate nature of the 'photograph' itself. The resulting decorative surface hides and reveals similar to Abbot Thayer's drawings in his book *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*, 1909 (Newark, T. 2007: 22), demonstrating colour adaptations in animals functioning as subterfuge for concealment and disguise.

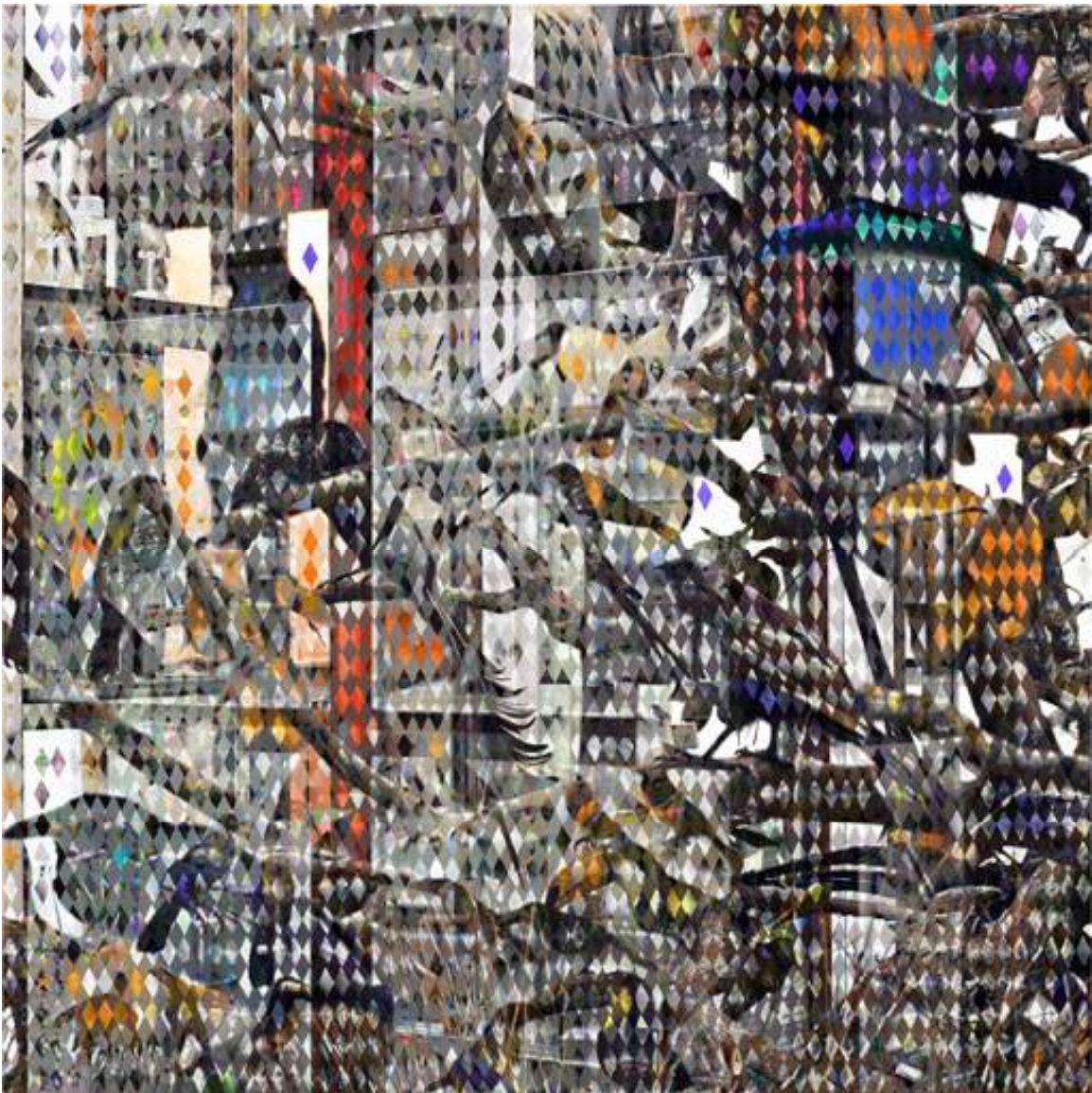


Figure 17 SEAR, H. 2008 *Display no.4* (Lambda print)

The display screen of the computer has replaced the membrane of photographic film and we can perform virtual operations on its surface. The diamond shapes become like x-ray windows cutting through the 'skin' of the image and revealing previously unseen surface and colour encoded in the image. Paradoxically the overall image appears simultaneously camouflaged by an application of 'painted' colour and animated by a visual noise comparable to the screen itself. The 'drawing' in both *Inside the View* and *Display* is used as a tactic to challenge our viewing responses. In response to the forensic control afforded by the computer screen this intervention brings the viewer into a position of seeing beyond the screen. The surface of the image shared similarities with pictures I had seen of enlarged sections of early autochrome plates, particularly the Finlay screen pattern that closely resembles colour configurations used in the production of the latest LCD screen technology.

The production of this work is now completely in the realm of the digital— both in camera and through re-construction in the computer, which raises questions regarding its status within the photographic, and particularly the original source as in the photographic negative. As there is no negative in the digital image it could be argued that there are possibilities for a multiplicity of originals. My interest in the original negative arises from its status as a unique source that is degraded through copying and re-copying as with videotape. Digital images remain immune from this accumulation of visual noise through copying. In an age of digital replication where quality remains constant I am deliberately reintroducing the animating qualities of visual noise in many of my processes, which by

association refer to older technologies. Thomas Ruff's monumental photographs *Jpegs* (2004) explore compressed files downloaded from the internet and enlarged to breaking point, bringing the pixel centre stage, and Sherrie Levine's *Meltdown* (1989) prints, combine an average of all colours in a Monet painting through a computer programme. One reveals the technological in its making, the other conceals. *Display* develops this engagement a stage further by forcing the image to reveal itself through an extreme distortion of Photoshop's 'colour corrections' primary function.

The intended presentation of *Display* as 'wallpaper' to be applied to the walls of the Gallery G39 in January 2009 returns the photographic image to the limits of the architectural space of the gallery and surrounds the viewer. This brings the viewing body back to the centre of the work, simulating the original experience of the bird room in La Specola.

The second piece *Projection* was made in 2007 and re-edited in 2008 and is a continuous video loop installation. This video installation is an exploration into landscape/seascape/skyscape as both a site of memory and desire, and a site emerging from and conditioned by the body and our human interaction with the world. The images are an animated sequence of still photographs of empty plastic slide boxes. Back lit by the light of the projector they become abstract landscapes, taking the place of the landscape transparencies the boxes once contained. (fig.18)

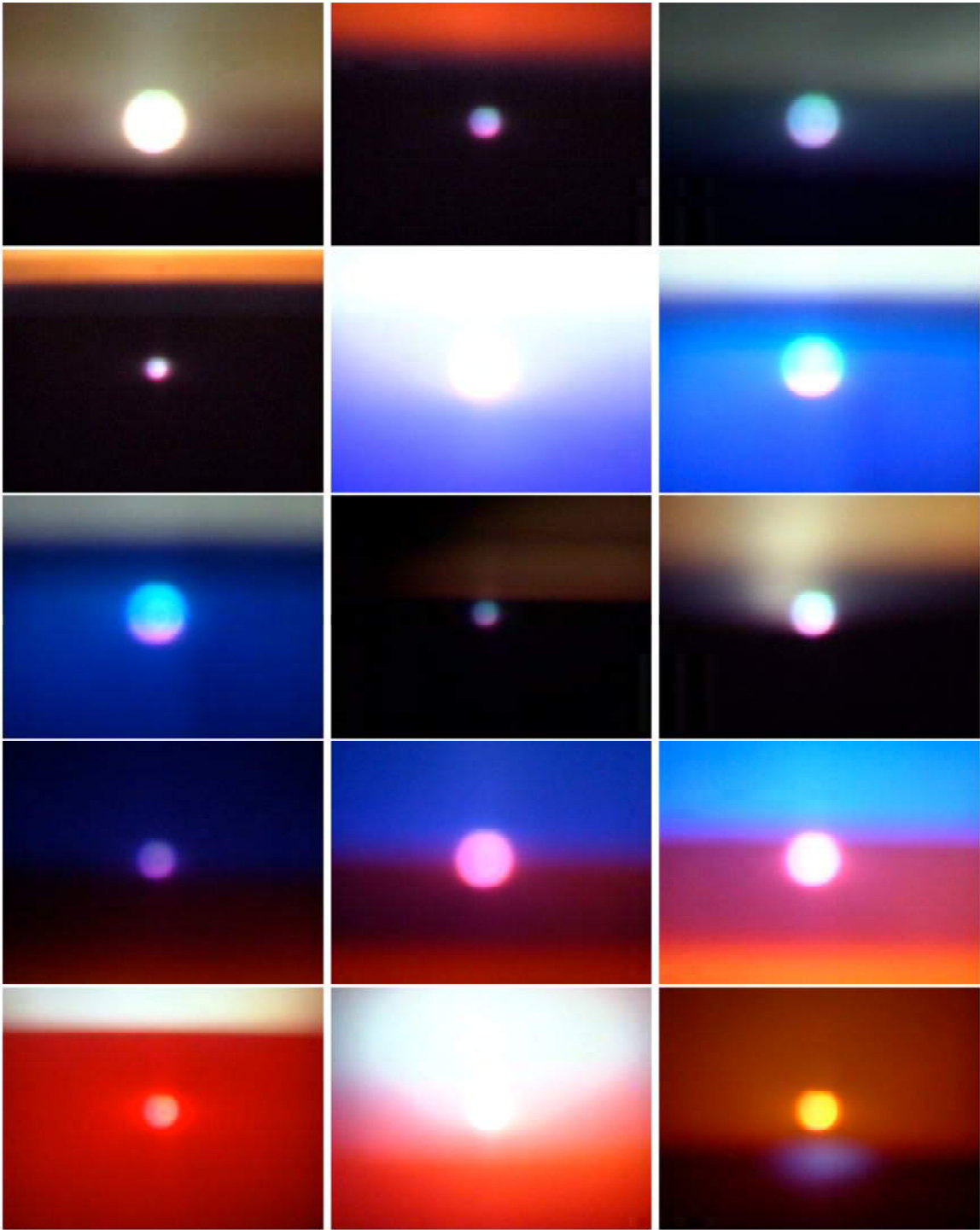


Figure 18 SEAR, H. 2008 *Projection* (Stills from Video installation)

As the sun burned into the retina of the likes of Gustav Fechner in the nineteenth century, whilst experimenting with the corporeality of vision, and the body as the site of chromatic effects, so in *Projection* the slide projector beam renders the artificial eye of the digital video camera unable to fix or focus upon the image projected. The ‘blink’ of the projectors’ shutter as it advances the carousel completes the illusion of the landscape/seascape becoming fused with the eye itself. Jonathan Crary writes about how the camera obscura, used by Kepler and Newton to avoid looking directly into the sun was transformed by Turner by repositioning the artist observer.

‘His solar preoccupations were “visionary” in that he made central in his work the retinal processes of vision; and it was the carnal embodiment of sight that the camera obscura denied or repressed. In one of Turner’s great later paintings, the 1843 *Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory)—The Morning After the Deluge*, the collapse of the older model of representation is complete: the view of the sun that had dominated so many of Turner’s previous images becomes a fusion of eye and sun.’ (Crary, 1999: 139)

In *Projection* the pulse of the work oscillates between complete darkness and the extreme light causing the effects of an ‘afterimage’ which Edmund Burke) examines in his essay on the Sublime and Beautiful ‘Extreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness’ (Burke 2001: *Light*) It is this extreme opposition which Burke describes as being one of the necessary components of the sublime experience. He also describes the dual experiences of relaxing and straining of the dilating pupil of the eye in extreme darkness and the pain and pleasure involved in the sublime.

Such a tension it seems there certainly is, whilst we are involved in darkness; for in such a state, whilst the eye remains open, there is a continual nusus to receive light; this is manifest from the flashes and luminous appearance which often seem in theses circumstances to play before it; and which can be nothing but the effect of spasms, produced by its own efforts in pursuit of its object: several other strong impulses will produce the idea of light in the eye, besides the substance of light itself. (Burke,2001: *Why Darkness is Terrible*)

The image of the completely dilated pupil as a hungry black-hole actively seeking to devour light is something, which I believe, activated the relationship between the viewer and the image in both the portraiture work *Twice... Once* and the *Untitled* light boxes. Burke is also hinting at the effects produced by flashes and luminous appearances in the absence of light which were developed by Goethe as a theory of vision emanating from the body was influential in the development of processes used in both *Gone To Earth* and *Covert* to articulate a border or space between the interior and exterior.

David Batchelor quotes Le Corbusier's' *Journey To The East* in his book *Chromophobia*

The eye becomes confused, a little perturbed by this kaleidoscopic cinema where dance the most dizzying combinations of colours: The colour exists for the caress and intoxication of the eye.” Batchelor is using this as one of many examples of how colour has been described as a narcotic spell where we might lose focus and our sense of distinctions between things. He describes a descent into delirium a fall from order and that, which cannot be controlled. “Colour is dangerous. It is a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness. Colour requires, or results in, or perhaps just is, a loss of focus, of identity of self. (Batchelor, 2000: 51)

The photographed slide-boxes appear as landscapes of the infinite, each with an uninterrupted horizon line but the saturated manufactured colour of the plastic slide-boxes and the plastic itself retains its condition of a continuous surface or skin introducing a sense of claustrophobia in the image. I believe that this sensation can be experienced even when projected as light. Keith Arnatt’s series of photographs, *Canned Sunsets* (1990-91), depict a series of used tins of commercially produced paint photographed on their sides to resemble sunsets. The work refers both to the tradition of Romantic landscape painting and the convention of the sunset in popular photography. The fact that the most beautiful sunsets occur in locations with the most pollution points to a plasticisation of the world and it is this expression of a nature now completely constructed by man that to which *Projection* alludes.

The sound of the slide projector is used as a rhythmic device throughout the piece, recalling old technology, manipulated and altered through new digital devices. The sound enhances the physicality of presentation by interrupting the contemplative absorption of the image by the viewer. This piece is a direct continuation of issues explored in *Light Seeking Transparency*, but the piece has become further abstracted. The digital video camera faces the analogue slide projector and is unable to focus. This allows the projected image to function both as the blink of an eye, the dilation of the pupil, and simultaneously the circular source of light similar to a sun or planet, above or below a horizon. *Projection* re-animates the still image as the act of looking itself, once again collapsing the distance between the viewer and the viewed. *Projection* was first shown as part of a night screening in the streets of Paris curated by Lucy Reynolds of LUX film and video agency London, in collaboration with Miss China Beauty Gallery, Paris, in 2007.

Conclusion:

An overriding characteristic of the work presented, has been the disruption of conventional and fixed modes of perceiving the photographic image, through the physical fragmentation of images or the optical effects of camouflage. Such perceptual disruptions have produced a more embodied viewing experience of the work. Power relationships between the observer and the observed are inherent in the act of photography and through my work I have attempted to offer alternative relationships from a feminine perspective. It is through challenging the formal conventions of the photographic image—those limited by static perspective— that I have developed alternative positions when using the iconography of the body and landscape.

My practice developed unique processes, which have disrupted the visual field of the image through layering, fragmenting, excavating and rupturing the surface of both analogue and digital lens-based material. Working with analogue processes I have drawn attention to the phenomenology of the image by projecting upon and distorting the ‘skin’ of the image, to emphasise its status as an object in the world rather than a window onto the world. It is through a physical engagement with the materials of photography—the plastic silicate of film and the continuous surface of the photographic print— that I have attempted an animated relationship with the viewing body and the artwork. In my work with lens-based digital media and the computer I have attempted to reintroduce a tactile intimacy lost through the ephemeral nature of the image. This activity is closer to the activity of painting than of traditional photographic practice, and in this sense my practice

can be aligned with a hybridity of media, which is becoming more prevalent as the meanings and debates surrounding photographic practice and the real are increasingly challenged by the digital. My work has made an original and creative contribution to contemporary lens-based practice— particularly in the development of relationships between painting, drawing, the photographic, and the moving image.

This contribution has been reflected and celebrated in an international exhibition record and a continued engagement with the understanding of practice within an educational context.

Sear is one of photography's foremost innovators...In general photography borrows from artists and artworks that allow it to retain its well-established modes of realism and transparency. But Sear shows there are other relations photography may take up to the painterly... She does things few others do with the medium. Each new body of work is a separate challenge for herself and the viewer. It is a relentless process of intellectual risk, aesthetic demand and technical experiment. (Campany, 2005: 66)

During the last twenty-five years I have sustained an investigation into the physical presence of both photographic and moving image media. The camera, the photographic negative, the print and the screen of the computer are all sites which I have drawn attention to in my work. Rather than let their status remain as invisible vehicles, or carriers of information, I have explored these sites as having a thickness comparable with that of the body and aspired to animate and affect the viewing body. Exploring the lens-based image as being unbounded by the limits of conventional perspective, I have attempted to release the viewer from a single viewing position, to visualise the body, imagination and the world as dynamic, simultaneous and inseparable.

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