

I am seated at the kitchen table in the converted butcher's shop where Helen Sear lives with her painter partner Andreas Ruthi. On the table before me is a round, resin tabletop heat protector, about 9 inches across, a stand for the brew we will share. The disc is just under an inch thick and has a bevelled top edge and small lumps as 'feet' on its underside, which make it appear to float above the tablecloth, with an accentuated drop shadow. Contained within the resin are ten large polished fragments of Paua shell from New Zealand, where Helen's family lived before her. These larger chunks reflect opalescent contours of vivid colour in blues, greens and pinks. The alluring gradients are embedded just above a subtler layer of much smaller chips of shell, which glisten like a particular Pacific beach. I'm guessing it's from the 1960's but aesthetically it could be from the 40's.

From teatime to the bottom of the ocean without moving, is this how we see?

The object described here could act as visual brief. Within the preceding paragraph there are issues raised relating to three-dimensional flatness and layering and reflected light and insertion and history and Nature and perception. This kind of complex compacting of numerous themes and enquiry into one vehicle is something that reoccurs in the work made by British artist Helen Sear since the early 1980s. By not visually representing the object something else emerges in your imagination. This text is asking you, the reader, to work. Sear too will ask you to work in processing her pictures. She is not complacent about production technologies or the tools and materials available to her. She has always developed and interrogated her own processes, which in turn, becomes a part of her subject matters. She has described this as, "disturbing the viewer through the distortion of process." She emerged from Art School at the end of the Conceptual 70's to a British Art scene where Photography's place was still being negotiated. Works as varied as Helen Chadwick's and Tim Head's set precedents that were thoughtful *and* visually engaging, often playing with the idea of the decorative. Her early work often explored what she refers to as 'the fractured space'. Sear would take us to the interior of a broken camera as installation or let us bear witness to constructions which began to propose simultaneous locations through use of embedded lights and projections.

I am looking at a photographic image and what I see is a picture. Picture. One word casually encompasses so many versions of an idea any subtlety and all discreet nuances are ignored. A brain does the conversion without discipline. The painting 'Manhattan Boogie Woogie' by Piet Mondrian is a picture but so are the moments preserved on your cell phone. I wonder what they have in common? (Apart from corners...) All this bothers about Photography and images and pictures and all the visual slip-sliding that is happening with language that barely keeps up with technological redefinitions let alone societal semantics. As ineffectual as a puppy's paw on an i-Pad, how can we really talk about what we are seeing these days? Sear plays on this. It's hard to define exactly what she makes, and she knows that.

I could happily wake up to one of the images from her series 'Inside the view', the super verdant one with the poppies. I'd like it about 10 feet from the foot of my bed please. I would open my eyes and for that sleepy moment I'd be in the

picture plane too. All over it. Yet the shockingly intricate production of these images is not belied by a little look at that distance. It's worth drinking in the detail. Repositioning yourself as *a* spectator (you are implied in the pictures as *the* spectator) to wonder how what you think you are seeing may have happened. The series digitally combines landscapes and rear viewed female head-and-shoulders. The combination process has a universal sense of woven craft. Intricate webs, recognizably hand-drawn, like microscopic cellular structures, create a second ambiguity after the pictorial spaces presented have befuddled your ability to 'read' the represented space. She's playing with our eyes. It's inclusive play, we are having fun together. With different viewing distances offering different visual experiences we can oscillate between an awareness of the process as subject matter but also the idea of the represented Woman in pictorial tradition as something to be consumed. The turned head belies interactivity, truncates an exchange. Similarly the cultural precedents linking Women with Nature, with reproduction, is reinstated in the arable fields and Autumnal bounty. These meshings of visual and cultural theory may seem oblique, but as Sear says herself, "I like things to be complicated, I want to raise questions."

She delights in positioning her work between *knowing* and *feeling*. At her most recent UK show at Hoopers Gallery in London she showed a range of working methods from 'traditional' straight photographs to manipulated work to installations carefully lit before recording and observations from her travels. Birds and animals reoccur in and as landscapes. Vegetations yearn to spring from their imaged residue. Tactile subjects lend their charms to the picture plane. Different scales of printing and many kinds of framing give way to one another in small structural hangs and seemingly informal accumulations. It all works together though I'd be darned to explain how.

Nowadays a lot of photographs look like photographs. This could be down to any number of factors. Digital technology smoothes and compresses as it glides along. Modular, over-subscribed education creates formal expectations and conservative project driven 'bodies of work'. The market place rewards artists who make marketable product. History books are written for convenience. A broader interest in photography comes with the tyranny of popularity that dumbs down content. Sear does not fall into this bracket. Sometimes I think she's actually an installation artist who goes as far into a space as you can whilst remaining two dimensional, or flat at least. When does a surface start being a thing? If an object is, say, just a molecule thick in it's x axis but infinite in y and z does that make it two or three-dimensional?

Over the years key veins of enquiry run through Sear's out put, seen together I think you can *feel* how they relate, but *knowing* why takes more time. Her photographs are like migration mysteries, no one quite understands how it works, but it works. Her photographs are like roaming creatures in uncharted territory with a perfect sense of where they are headed because 'lost' is nothing to them. There is a seductive romance to accepting something that is as it is, but I find the more I unpick the threads of enquiry that mesh in Sear's work the more is revealed and the stronger it becomes.

