



Fiona Crisp

**container makes the frame,
the frame creates the screen,
the screen...**

Simon Morrissey

A woman is attending to an involved task beneath the open hatchback of her car. On the rear shelf of the car the woman positions a small, featureless black cube. The woman could be a surveyor, but her equipment seems too eccentric, her focus too oblique. The car faces the sea. It's headrests have been removed and lie on the ground. The car's doors are open making the normal container of the vehicle a permeable structure. The car stands on the edge of the land, a net into which the surrounding landscape flows, simultaneously within and without.

What is the performative activity this woman is engaged in? Cartography? Archaeology? It is unlikely the answer that may be offered in response to this question would be photography. But Fiona Crisp's images are concerned with the interaction of the body and the space that surrounds it, the play of container and containment. A sense of both mapping and excavation have therefore become essential elements in their configuration.

The reference to an archeological enquiry within her work suggests Crisp has an awareness that the ability to move between different locations that is commonplace in our conception of space is equally present in time. But it is the works' explicit awareness of film and photography's ability to operate as conduits for this transit that confirms Crisp's concern with the transmission of space and time. The image holds within it the power to move the

viewer elsewhere, elsewhen. And it is within our familiarity with this ability that Crisp has located her practice.

Before undertaking the residency in Berwick-upon-Tweed, the artist had primarily engaged in making an extended series of images entitled *Still Films*. Compressing the qualities of the still and moving image into a single plane, the artist inverted the normal conventions of cinematic narrative, to create works which conveyed a delicate, fluid transgression of our preconceived assumptions of spatial boundaries within a moment that, in direct opposition to the still images taken from films, contain the suggestion of narrative potential but exist effectively without history or consequence.

In the *Still Film* works, Crisp exploited the mechanisms of narrative whilst withholding its ability to function, such as creating a particular locus of attention through the presence and concealment of character. Initial works in the series featured a definite but ungendered figure always pictured within the confinement of similarly neutral architectural space. Always pictured facing away from the camera, the figure's identity was kept abstract, often wearing a hood not unlike the murderous dwarf in Nicholas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now*. In later works, this abstraction was achieved by the figure moving within the extended temporal dimension of the exposure creating different intensities of manifestation. Although always detectable, always present, the figure has a

strange variable translucency, allowing the surrounding architecture to be seen through it.

This coexistence of figure and ground suggests the figure's presence is perhaps more a mediator through which to negotiate and parallel space than it is a cipher for narrative. Rather than the mechanisms of narrative per se, it is the image's ability to contain the expression of space and time that is of primary interest to Crisp. Her figure is not so much a suppressed character as a measure and a bridge, a point of reference through which the viewer participates in and assimilates the depicted space.

It was this overriding concern with the delineation and transmission of space that attracted the artist to the possibility of making work within the context of Berwick. Situated in the crease of land carved where the river Tweed meets the North Sea, Berwick is a particularly tangible form of architectural container. Defined by its situation as a defensive encampment on the border between the once combative Scots and English, Berwick is encompassed by The Ramparts, a vast stone defensive wall. Throughout Crisp's work, it is perhaps this idea of the container, and by implication the definition and transgression of its boundaries, that has been the constant metaphor for her dialogue with space.

Originating from a sculptural background, Crisp became preoccupied with where the object ended and the world began. Her early work soon began to evolve away from sculpture towards the photographic image – a non-material means to discuss material reality – and settled on the body as a sculptural vessel. The artist's use of photography has always been rooted within an understanding of its physical presence as a container also, understanding that it is its existence as an object that permits the transmission of the image. Conditioned by a

sensitivity to site, the relationship of the work to the space it is framed within has been an inescapable discourse for Crisp, influencing not only the way in which the images physically manifest themselves and are installed, but how they function conceptually. Crisp has often described her works as 'false exits' from the spaces they are exhibited in, and in many senses they create impossible spaces, collisions of forms and planes that are compressed within a single depth of field with a disquieting equality.

This levelling of field arises from the way Crisp's photographs are created. Eschewing the technological trappings of the contemporary photographer, Crisp instead turned to one of the most basic forms of photographic image-making for her practice, the pin-hole camera. Without the possibility of using aperture size to alter depth of field or lens to create a point of focus, the resultant images are characterised by a collapsing of the normal distinction between



Still Film # 4. 1998. The Boiler House, Hackney Wick. Photographic paper & aluminium. 230 x 142 x 8 cm.

foreground and background and by a field of equal focus rather than one emphasised point. The container coexists equally not only with the contained, but with the uncontainable beyond.

There has been a sense of emanation in Crisp's work that has reached its widest point in the work made in Berwick. The idea of the container, that starts with the black box of the pin-hole camera, has moved in a outward progression, first to the body, then to architectural space, then out again to a geographical context. Unlike in mainstream image making, however, Crisp cannot frame her view through a viewfinder as her homemade cameras are themselves sealed spaces, and therefore the artist effectively creates her work blind. The artist has therefore replaced the plotting of space through the lens with a physical plotting through the structure of the sculptural frames she places into the image. Crisp responded to this expansion of her site to establish new mechanisms that could now encompass the particularities of place as well as the fundamental commonalities of space. Within this new expanded landscape, a measure being used to both familiarise and transmit space has been transferred, from the figure that she used in *Still Films*, to a series of frames derived from types of temporary architecture that are suggestive of human inhabitation. The first of these structures that Crisp established was that of the car. Starting with two images made prior to the Berwick residency in coastal Suffolk, the body of photographs the artist has developed uses the recognisable structure of the car, a near-architectural form that so often forms the edge of our experience as we navigate landscape, as a regulating form through which to contain and thus interpret geographical space.

Again referencing the space and mechanisms of cinema, the car photographs use the



Still Film # 1. 1998. The Boiler House, Hackney Wick. Photographic paper & aluminium. 400 x 142 x 8 cm.

windscreen to create a cinematic framing of landscape. This frame simultaneously renders its subject subservient, however. Whereas *Still Films* were in an explicit dialogue with cinema's mechanisms of narrative suggestion, the car works occupy a more oblique position, carefully situated between the mechanics of narrative and the formal structures of composition. Despite its recognisability as a car, small but vital decisions made by the artist condition our experience of the image. Crisp has been careful to remove traces of the personal and the anthropomorphic from her recent work, and in the car photographs deliberately removed the headrests from the vehicle to erase the implication of occupation by an individual or character. The viewer now participates in the images in the first person, occupying a subjective relationship with the work, implicated in the field that extends at the boundaries of Crisp's images.



Still Film # 18. 1999. Camerawork, London.
Photographic paper & aluminium. 145 x 280 x 8 cm.

Crisp has described Berwick as a mass which, despite the solidity of its architectural containment, is almost impossible to assimilate from within. In many of the works made in Berwick there is an inevitable attempt to locate the town, to establish its boundaries, to solidify its presence. In *Halidon Hill* and *Highcliffe Estate* Crisp positions her car on vantage points high above the town on opposing sides of the Tweed in an attempt to fix the town's presence. Framed by the dominant structure of the car, however, the town seems insubstantial, its definition lost to the texture of light and weather. Just discernible amongst the townscape is a tower-like structure that may be the central bell tower or may be the lighthouse. These two landmarks dominate the town, one at its centre, one at its periphery.

Of the two, it is perhaps the lighthouse that has become most synonymous with Berwick's identity. As such, Crisp felt perversely compelled to gain access to the building. Using the portals of the structure, window and door replacing windscreen in this instance, the artist created views out from the lighthouse, not views of it, once again situating her viewer inside the space of the image. *Lighthouse Door* opens almost inevitably onto the blankness of

the North Sea, while *Lighthouse Window's* view of the town is virtually obscured by a light that looks like a proxy for the lighthouse itself. The images are an inversion of the building's expected presence. It is as if Berwick continually warps like a dimensional instability.

This instability is that of a zone defined by edges rather than a centre, its personality contained in its attempt to withhold a dominating force beyond it, to stop the outside coming in. At its most explicit expression are *The Ramparts*. Within the works made in Berwick, *King Edward Citadel* and *The Stanks* draw attention to themselves not simply because they are free of the imposed structure that frames the exterior presence in all the other works, but also because of their saturated green palette. The only colour photographs in Crisp's new body of work, the works are expressed predominantly as concentrated colour, parallelling the dominance of the natural landscape that appears to contain Berwick's walled settlement through sheer density of colour. In the no-man's land between the vertical plane of the Ramparts and the natural force of the landscape, Crisp presents two prosaic and insubstantial attempts to define space, a group of wooden posts and a rectangle of tarmac, their reason for existence now

departed, their presence almost erased in the play of land and sky, light and shadow.

Crisp's inability to fix Berwick, to locate a tangible manifestation of what at first appears such a discernible container, is the result of the way in which human endeavour is overpowered by the sheer force of nature on the Northumbrian Coast. To say Berwick is a container is only to say that it is a human attempt to maintain a presence to counter the explicit containment the land experiences when pitted against the North Sea. For an artist so concerned with where the edge of our experience is located, with the dominant discourses of space, it is inevitable that Crisp would confront the ultimate edge, that between land and sea, to define Berwick's spatial dynamic.

On the high ground beyond Berwick, Crisp discovered another temporary architecture, an encampment of static caravans. Arranged like some makeshift outpost of the town, the caravans all face out towards the sea, attempting to encapsulate an image of the force that is at once most unknown and most desired. Yet each view through the frame of the caravan window is obscured, featuring a sea of other caravans all involved in the same task. In *TD8*,

the only caravan the artist gained access to that actually had an uninterrupted view of the sea, the screen of the window is compromised by its frame, the view of the horizon overlaid with the undulating abstraction of net curtains.

In *Cocklawburn*, however, there is no such obstacle. Crisp parked her car directly facing the sea on the coast below Berwick, a final explicit attempt to understand the edge of this experience. The sea is limitless, a flat grey plain without end, at once serene yet beyond comprehension. A lifebelt hangs on its support like a Christian offering, a prayer offered up by the weak for protection from the power of what cannot be understood.

Facing the featureless expanse of the North Sea, it is inescapable that Crisp's preoccupation is with containing the unknowable, limitless, space of the world. She chooses a container through which to mediate the boundlessness of space. The container makes the frame, the frame creates the screen, the screen...

The screen is the uncontainable, written blind with light.



Still Films. 1999. Camerawork, London.
Installation view. Photographic paper & aluminium.