



FIONA CRISP

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The somewhat Spartan surroundings of Matt's Gallery – insulated from the fluvial autumn rain and turmoil caused by a new landscape arriving by the truckload at the adjacent Mile End Park – seem totally appropriate for the showing of Fiona Crisp's bleak monochrome photographs. Eight images were exhibited: four show an interior view of a VW saloon, and through its windscreen to the Northumbrian coast beyond. Another four, similarly banal and matter-of-fact, show restricted panoramas of a caravan park, each framed by the windows of a different caravan.

Ironically, through their understated and muted visual messages, these images say rather more than those other in-your-face English seaside scenes – the biliously chromatic, overwrought images of Martin Parr. Crisp picks up here – with a dour empathy – on the misnomer of the North Sea coast 'holiday'; after all, these images are not black-and-white but multifarious shades of grey. With one exception, all these interiors (both car and caravan) have been depersonalised, their neutrality assured by the absence of both people and their belongings. The sense of absence is achingly prevalent. A pinhole camera gives Crisp's images a slightly fuzzy, dissipated demeanour that shuts out any hint of the precious or contrived. The surfeit of ennui here just seems to bleed off the edges of the images, adding its weight to the viscous wash of melancholia that sucks in and suffocates our gaze. That sense of melancholia, while implicit, is overpowering.

The car and caravan interiors become neutral ground over which the landscape views dominate, in much the same manner as the darkened interior of a cinema auditorium dissolves around the spectacle of the illuminated screen. Screen and vehicle both become puns here. In many ways Crisp's photographs are the absolute inverse of Hiroshi Sugimoto's celebrated and seductive images of luxuriant, baroque cinema interiors, where time-lapse photography has given the screens a blank, incandescent glare and the surrounding décor – both rich and kitsch – becomes the subject.

The missing narrative journey between Crisp's views and interiors has not just been suspended but squeezed out, excluded. Many questions are posed here, whose answers must remain mere speculations imported by the viewer. Ontological questions stealthily but surely creep up on the viewer. Whose deleted presences are we to relate to in these banal scenes, where all material evidence of personality has been removed? Whose space does our gaze invade? Why do interior and exterior remain such exclusive domains?

Guy Debord branded western culture 'the society of the spectacle', but in her very quiet and introspective way Fiona Crisp seems to be challenging this assertion. Here Crisp unashamedly presents us with an anti-spectacle, of which we cannot be passive observers – we must become active participants if we are to make sense of the cryptic negotiations that these images make with the world. Our participation must involve not only guesswork but also creative fantasy and imagination, two phenomena repeatedly subverted by the society of spectacle.

Fiona Crisp was at Matt's Gallery, London, 25 October – 17 December 2000

FIONA CRISP, installation view at Matt's Gallery, 2000, each work 120 x 150 x 3 cm. Courtesy: Matt's Gallery, London