

# THE PASSIVE EYE

ROY EXLEY ON THE RELEVANCE OF PINHOLE PHOTOGRAPHY IN A DIGITAL AGE



Peter Cleutjens, Doblik: 980701, 1999, inkjet print on canvas. Courtesy: the artist

In contrast to the restless, predatory eye that is the photographic lens, the passive opening in the wall of a pinhole camera is an infinitely more subtle and synergic transmitter of image from subject to film. As light penetrates the pinhole camera's closed, dark box, registering its presence on the photographic paper within, there is a slippage of time: a procession of moments replaces the frozen moment that is the stock-in-trade of lens-and-shutter-mediated images. Where the photographic lens relays images by collecting, focally compressing and then redistributing light behind its crystalline facets, events come and go before the passive eye of the pinhole camera, either passing invisibly or leaving their wraith-like smudges on the emulsion.

Victorian passion for all things scientific and technologically current. Of course, today's pinhole camera practitioners are more likely to see their work as a hand-made lo-tech antidote to the ubiquitous instantaneity of hi- or digital technology. Four such artists – Sian Bonnell, Fiona Crisp, Katia Liebmans and Peter Cleutjens – are doyens of a 'slow art', whose passion for a closer interface with the physicality of the photographic process informs their work. The gathered, gleaned image replaces the snatched, captured image, and chance supervenes control.

In contrast to lens-based photography, the process of achieving a pinhole image is reflective rather than reflexive. A premeditated series of events involves the production of the camera, its loading with light-

## in this age of the instant, in which we advance towards the hegemony of the nanosecond, why tolerate this reversion to the primordial?

The aleatory ambience of the pinhole photograph gives it a certain *frisson*, a touch of the anarchic. Its interface with reality is at once stronger and more random than that of the lens-based image. The direct transfer of light from one reality to another imbues the pinhole image with an element of magic, which the rationales of physics and chemistry cannot destroy. So, to Walter Benjamin's famous claim that the photograph lacked the aura of the painted image, you could add that he was disregarding the pinhole photograph.

The production of a pinhole image is a complex one whose history, via the *camera obscura* used by Canaletto and Vermeer to make studies for their paintings and experiments with pinhole imagery by the likes of Leonardo da Vinci and Johannes Kepler, goes back to the Renaissance. But the real heyday of the pinhole camera was in the 1890s (4000 pinhole cameras were sold in London alone in 1892), before the mass production of the lens-based camera got underway and when photography as a middle-class pastime had begun to gather momentum in line with the

sensitive film or paper, and its strategic positioning for the slow absorption of light to create the final image. It is sequentially fragmentary and, like process painting, it is essentially mediated by 'feel': an extended dialogue between the artist, the materials, and the objective. Yet in this age of the instant, in which we advance towards the hegemony of the nanosecond and court the relentless escalation of pixel ratings, why tolerate this reversion to the primordial? There is no single answer to that question; each of the artists has their own agenda. Yet none suggest a reactionary Luddism, instead each addresses issues and concerns that are current in contemporary image making whether that be painting, photography, video or filmmaking.

Sian Bonnell's staged photographs engage with domestic objects placed in the landscape. These objects become imbued with sculptural qualities when exiled from their utilitarian domestic roles. Jelly moulds, for example, are transmuted into bizarre landforms or exotic architectural maquettes. A sort of slow choreography is enacted between the inert box





Katia Liebmann, from the series *Shopping - Trips Ongoing*, 1998-, long-exposure pinhole photograph. Courtesy: the artist

of the pinhole camera and the randomly constellated moulds. Bonnell's staging here involves not only the objects that are the subject of the subsequent images, but also the camera for whose fixed aperture they become the objective. By virtue of being placed rather than held or mounted on a tripod, the pinhole camera becomes an object whose position is just one of the permutations in the variable constellations of objects in these staged scenes. Yet as far as the image is concerned, the camera itself is a wraith. Its presence has evaporated visually but not ontologically: this invisible box is an incontrovertible part of the existence of that image. Its protean darkness becomes a receptacle into which light, the messenger of reality, floods and becomes transfixed, in an infinitesimally reduced rerun of creation.

In a similar vein, the pinhole images of Fiona Crisp also indicate that a spatial relationship, a locational synergy, operates between camera and photographed scene. In her *Berwick Gymnasium* and *Santa Maria* series the pinhole camera is placed at the back of an interior space that could easily be perceived as an ersatz camera obscura. And so, just like the focal plane of the camera itself, the camera becomes the invisible focal point of that space. This is particularly true of the *Berwick Gymnasium* images, where the camera was placed sometimes on the back shelf of a car or in a caravan, and the landscape image in the subsequent photograph is viewed through the windscreen of the car or end window of the caravan which have effectively become secondary lenses. Anchored within a screen, the images have an uncannily cinematic quality.

One of the recurring concerns of contemporary photography is that of identity, or the questions of identity that arise in our pluralist, eclectic and multicultural society. Identity is of course primarily about relationships and the transient negotiations and exchanges that define

such relationships. How, with the lack of human presence that is notable in the work of both of these artists, are questions of identity being addressed? Both artists seem, in fact, to be taking a negative, reductive approach to the idea of identity: the location of identity through its absence, pinpointing its chimera through its ghostly traces in the empty scene. Bonnell is in fact questioning the traditional identity of the housebound housewife through the dispersion of domestic artefacts across the landscape, a bizarre and whimsical gesture that dislocates the housewife's anachronistic image, transforming her tools into monolithic monuments, museal sculptures in the landscape. Crisp, in her *Santa Maria* series, examines the identity of the church, we don't see the high altar or the congregation, but merely the seats which are the mute evidence of their periodic presence and which are orientated towards the altar. The architecture of the churches (all in the environs of Rome and all bearing the name 'Santa Maria') is sidelined in these images, the celebration of the glory of God put on hold. The traditional identity of the church is transformed by the unorthodox viewpoint from which these images were gained. We are left to guess at the size and devoutness of that absent congregation.

The health of our societies is increasingly diagnosed by sales figures and the flow of consumer goods. The pinhole images of the Berlin-based artist Katia Liebmann put a seductive gloss on the very process of buying that we are all conditioned to consummate. With a pinhole camera nestled in the back of her trolley her trips around the supermarket and consequent purchases are visually documented. We are confronted in several images by a fish's eye that returns the pinhole camera's stare. In other images the faces of fashion models appear, distorted by the curve of rolled-up magazines, bringing a glamorous, if superficial, foil to the ubiquitous brand names and logos that surround them in the trolley. In

Katia Liebmann, from the series *Shopping - Trips Ongoing*, 1998-, long-exposure pinhole photograph. Courtesy: the artist







Sian Bonnell, *Putting Hills in Holland*, 2001, movie still. Courtesy: the artist



Sian Bonnell, *Constructed Landscape No. 1*, 2001, pinhole photograph. Courtesy: the artist

her *Shopping Speed* series the garish supermarket lights have become superimposed, constructing delicate networks of light as their orientation and relative positions change during the voyage around the supermarket. The result is an ethereal but ultimately claustrophobic fairground-like display, forging a time signature for these images in which a whole chain of events is compressed into one visual moment, somehow subtly lifting them above the banality that they otherwise court. The bars of the trolley and the manically clustering strip lights have an aggressive, visually oppressive quality, amplifying that experience of the tortuous struggle around a crowded and hostile supermarket — the passivity of the camera overwhelmed by visual overkill.

A bridge between the primitive nature of the pinhole camera and the up-to-speed use of digital technology is provided by Peter Cleutjens' images. He introduces hand-crafted objects into a self-built pinhole camera to interrupt the registration of the image within. His images become a hybrid between constructed photograph and orthodox pinhole image. Cleutjens then scans and enlarges his images in Photoshop, but doesn't manipulate them. These images are then exhibited as large-

format inkjet prints on canvas which have seductive, painterly qualities. Their reality imbues his images with the mien of habitable spaces, yet the enigmatic dynamics of these spaces, part figurative and part abstract, create the illusion that they are part two-dimensional and part three-dimensional. Interior and exterior become confused, suggesting alien, sci-fi scenarios. The analogic, manual nature of the pinhole camera allows Cleutjens a hands-on craftsman-like approach to his work that, paradoxically, creates exotic other-worldly images. These painterly images emphasise something that all pinhole photographs, with their infinite depth of field, share: the pictorial qualities of the painting.

Neither mainstream, nor an anachronism, the contemporary pinhole image is yet another means, another vehicle, through which the contemporary photographer can test the vagaries of the time-based image, enabling a continuing proactive exploration of that relationship between object and image, which, in tune with cultural changes, is in continual flux.

ROY EXLEY IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND CURATOR

Fiona Crisp, *Cocklawburn*, 2002, photograph on aluminium. Courtesy: Matt's Gallery



Fiona Crisp, *TD46*, 2002, photograph on aluminium. Courtesy: Matt's Gallery

