UNCERTAIN STATES / 04

Robin Griesons Title: Coal Bunker - Year: 2010

ROBIN GRIERSON

Photographs of Fishburn Coke Works
I grew up in Fishburn, a coal mining village in County Durham. Fishburn Pit opened in 1910, and closed in 1973, when I was eleven years old. The adjacent coke works were built in 1954 and during their thirty five years of working life, a battery of fifty verticle ovens carbonized coal into coke (a smokeless fuel), Town Gas and various coal tar byproducts. Alternating ovens worked continually, 365 days a year, until their closure in 1988. They were hastily demolished in 1989.

Fishburn was a small village, with that huge industrial plant butted up to it, where many of the villagers worked. Like it or not the 'cokies' distinguished our home from any other humdrum place. As you approached the village on the main road you went right past its large structures made of reinforced concrete and steel, with blackened chimneys blowing out sulphide and steam. The smell was notorious in the region. People from neighbouring villages called it 'smelly Fishburn'. Those thundering black ovens resembling a massive organ were part of our consciousness. Glowing coke and ash emptied from charged ovens every few minutes, turning the night sky orange. As a small child, sometimes I imagined that the world was about to end in some terrifying disaster.

Many of the villages in County Durham were mining villages; their dark iron lift shaft wheels silhouetted against the skies, their dark grey slag heaps outgrowing the natural terrain; and chimney stacks, and mine heads a common site on the horizon. But if you go there today, you would never know. All traces have been extinguished, replaced by neatly landscaped fields of sheep and conifer plantations. Most former pit yards now have sterile looking industrial units erected on their sacred grounds. It is sad and strange, that this important part of Britain seemed to vanish overnight.

My father's bus garage sat at the edge of the pit yard, and shared an entrance with the adjoining coke works. One of my photographs shows my father seated, with the last of the coke works' chimneys looming precariously in the distance. Friends and I spent our formative years roaming the pit heaps to find birds eggs, hunt with air rifles and ride our ramshackle motor bikes. I took the photographs at various times not really thinking that much about the future of the place.

www.robingriesons.co.uk

SUSAN ANDREWS

Recently, I've found myself wondering about the motivation and intention of the artist/photographer in making "work" and what sets this "work" apart from the plethora of images that confront us on a daily basis. What is it that makes the photographs of such practitioners different from the profusion of images found for example on Flickr or Facebook, if indeed they are different, or do these new sites simply represent the inevitable forward trajectory of the history of photography? After all, are we now not all photographers? It is estimated that 250 billion digital photographs were made in 2007 and photographic libraries such as Getty regularly trawl sites such as Flickr for photographs, whilst agencies such as Reuters suggest that the general public could all be their stringers.

Predictably, there are opposing schools of thought relating to the path that photography has taken in the digital era; on one hand, it should be celebrated that the medium has become truly democratic in that it is available to everyone, (at least in the first world, though fewer than 4% of Africans are connected to the web - Ritchen 2009) but at the same time in this explosion of imagery there is a sense that something has been irrevocably lost. However, any commercial photographer will tell you that finding work is increasingly difficult and remuneration for any such work is in serious decline but of far more concern in the broader sense, is the actual devaluation of the meaning of the image through both its overproduction and overuse, and equally of the consequential inattention of both photographer and audience. Fred Ritchen states in the preface to his book *After Photography* "We no longer think, talk, read, listen, see the same way…. We appear to be on a mission to wallpaper our sightlines with deracinated images of so little value that they render us numb whilst simultaneously telling us that we can now see."

Of course, there are many benefits associated with digital technology and the web offers new means of communication and dissemination, providing artists/photographers with a potentially worldwide audience. In addition, the radical changes brought about by online publishers, such as Blurb, have led to a revolution in the industry, providing everyone with cheap and readily available access to the book publishing market. With the convenience of digital storage, there has also been a growing interest in building photographic archives, making these important resources readily accessible to a wider public.

In 1966 Szarkowski said, "More convincingly than any other kind of picture, a photograph evokes the tangible presence of reality. Its most fundamental use and its broadest acceptance has been as a substitute for the subject itself – a simpler, more permanent, more clearly visible version of the plain fact." Currently, it could be argued that digital technology has afforded new freedom to photographers, liberating them from their assumed role as documentarians, breaking the accepted link between photographic representation and reality, and consequently affording them the freedom formerly afforded to the painter, to imagine and suppose. Indeed, artists such as John Goto, rather than lamenting the crisis of the real, have readily explored the possibilities of digital imagery, "investing the electronic operations themselves with meaning." (Nancy Roth 2007)

On the basis of such evidence, one would envisage a fertile environment in which the artist/photographer would thrive, but the fact remains that despite all the promise associated with these benefits, the proliferation of imagery has led to an associated reduction in the value and meaning of the photograph. It is now worth little either in financial terms (with the exception of the fine art market) or as a representation worthy of time, thought and scrutiny. It appears that in society's quest for more and faster and slicker, integrity has been abandoned. There is simply too much imagery and photography has become ephemeral and disposable, like tinsel and dust.

Inevitably, despite this general surfeit of photographs there does, of course, exist work that resonates conceptually, visually and psychologically. Maybe the word "work" is a key starting point in evaluating the significance of a photograph - a purposeful effort, a photographer's practice, something that is entered into with attention and reason. Ritchen talks about numbness in relation to the over-proliferation of photographs and the term "image fatigue" is frequently used in relation to documentary photography but could equally apply to other genres. Such observations seem to suggest that it is becoming more difficult to recognize a "meaningful" or "interesting" image as viewers become both desensitised through over-exposure and conditioned to the short attention spans required for most online photographic viewing.

Picture: David Townend

Picture: Damian Gillie

Picture: Ian Atkinson

It is somehow then both intriguing and significant that a collective of photographers should choose to start a printed broadsheet quarterly to explore new work. The publication, *Uncertain States*, publishes work outside the mainstream commercial and amateur markets and in unfolding the paper one is invited to sit down with a coffee, read, look and consider. The photographs are consequently required to have meaning and value that withstands closer inspection. However, it is also the role of the viewer to take time and look; the relationship is symbiotic. Whether the photographs are made digitally or with film and traditional processes is of little matter in itself, rather it is the intention of the photographer in making the work that is important. These photographs are meant to be considered, their layers of meaning unwrapped, one might term this an "analogue approach" to making work, where both the making and reception of the work requires our careful attention.

In this issue of *Uncertain States* the photographer Robin Grierson shows a selection of photographs he made during the 1980s of the Fishburn Coke Works in County Durham. He has recently revisited this work with a view to making a book entitled, *John Laidlaw* that tells the story of the time, place and people. Today all signs of the coke works have vanished from the landscape but these photographs provide a trace that marks its existence. Grierson says that when he took the photographs he didn't really know what they meant but through a process of revisiting the work over time, their significance has become apparent to him. It is the photographer's relationship with the place that he grew up in, along with an astute "eye" that makes these images resonate both with loss and integrity. The black and white photographs of dilapidated edifices haunt the landscape like great dying beasts, some images reminiscent of the topological work of the Beschers, but in this case there is no detached gaze, here is the eye of someone who was intimately involved. These are images resurrected from history, highlighting the injustice that marked the demise of the once thriving community that surrounded the works. Today, if people in the district have work, they are employed in diverse places and the kinship that once marked the community is gone.

Sometimes it takes time to understand the significance of work and how that work should be made. Maybe it is also significant that this photographic work should resurface in another era of uncertainty for many communities, when swathes of spending cuts threaten the stability of the lives of ordinary people, as attempts are made to repay the country's deficit. As such, Grierson's powerful work, rendered authentic as history, has become both timely and current.

The artist Ulka Karandikar also re-examines a photograph from another era but in this case it is a found image and one of her father. The photograph shows a young man sitting face on to the camera as he stares back at the photographer and viewer alike. It is a simple head and shoulders shot probably taken in a small studio in the seventies and maybe made for some official purpose, like a passport, but we cannot know and in the context of this work it is not relevant. It is merely a simple photograph from the past that allows the artist the recognition of time, moment and history. She sees herself in him, maybe for the first time, but she certainly sees him now as a man her age, her time-travelling contemporary and she connects with him. The photograph offers us the unique, and historically recent, opportunity to see our parents when young and in so doing it proposes empathy with the dreams and desires of another generation; we look like them, they look like us, and maybe they also think like us.

Maybe the connection between truth, image and reality is more dependent on the context of the photograph rather than the technology

Karandikar's beautifully written thoughts, triggered by the rediscovery of this photograph, take her to a point of recognition and understanding of the man that is now her father but wasn't at the time of the photograph. Between then and now there is a gulf that she fills with words from the present. This thoughtful work, which uses image and text so effectively, considers familial relationships and the potential for understanding between the generations. However, it essentially reflects on a characteristic quality of the photograph, in this case specifically made for an unknown purpose, which has the ability to act as a metaphor for each viewer and to elicit in each a personal response; we receive the message, recognize it and are touched by its authenticity.

It was the work *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel concerning the author's experience of learning Zen from a master, which inspired the photographer Cartier Bresson to develop his concept, "the decisive moment." Commonly understood as the right moment to press the shutter, it has aesthetic, conceptual and spiritual dimensions. In many ways it is about "paying close attention" to framing and content and understanding one's medium so well that it becomes artless, giving space for a spiritual connection in the present with the external world. Aviv Yaron's work is rooted very much within these ideas and his work is a consequence of intense thinking and careful watching. In the work *In Another Place* Yaron is looking for signs of a different time, a Palestinian village, the remains of which is now used for cattle from the kibbutz. Here Yaron uses analogue technology to explore his ideas. Indeed, it is essential to the aesthetic and meaning of the work that it is shown traced with chemical marks from its processing that allude to another time but also refer to the physical and emotional scars left by years of conflict. An interesting aspect of this technique is that it draws our attention to the artifice of the photograph. This image after all is merely a depiction of reality, a filter that re-directs and re-presents; it is simply a point of view that carries a message, but is so convincing because of its connection with reality at a given moment in time. Yaron's message is also compelling as it quietly asks us to consider "the other" and their history. However, beyond the specific, this haunting work contemplates all the losses that can only partially be rescued by photography.

In the work *Mill*, extracted here from his book, Damian Gillie has also tuned his attention to transitions brought about by the passage of time and changes in society. It was the impending destruction of the redundant flourmill in Cambridge that drew Gillie to photograph its threatened interior before it disappeared forever. In many ways a photographer is a collector of moments, arresting the flow of time, often keeping the photographed as a proxy for the real for succeeding generations. Underscoring this, Walter Benjamin suggested that the true collector was one who liberates things "from the bondage of utility" and through the act of photography the transformed and re-contextualised subject is freed from its original significance and other meanings are made possible. Gillie seems to embrace this fact and the photographed object seems less a representation of the real and more a metaphor: the redundant and disconnected tubes of the mill are the entangled, giant innards of a once living organism; a slashed, blood-red sheet suspended in time, testament to an abrupt end; the curling tubes of colour suggestive both of violence and sensuality. Gillie's powerful photographs resurrect significance for the superfluous space that once heaved with life.

In the work *George's Place*, David Townend is also motivated to preserve for posterity. While the subject matter refers to the long history of a man's life, these intense colour photographs are undoubtedly contemporary. The camera is a tool to make a posthumous portrait of George through the careful scrutiny of his home and belongings and in so doing we are invited to look vigilantly as if the evidence were forensic. Townend systematically reveals an extraordinary life: a photograph of piles of books bathed in golden Californian light – a man of culture and learning; another photograph of extracted teeth put on one side but not discarded - a collector; the shocking photograph of a very old man's deathbed, a man who has lived for too long alone, that so starkly reminds us of our own inevitable death. Townend is looking for the detail. His photographs are intimate yet unsentimental, they are something to keep safe; they are his story.

Ian Atkinson however, is interested in bringing particular instants in time together. His carefully constructed photographs, reflecting issues arising from the potential of digital photography, depict several generations taken from different points in time within a single image. This work however, is made on film and is the product of an extended process of thought and planning. As with the work of Karandikar, the viewer is encouraged to make links between different times and generations and we are asked to contemplate, in the words of Jeff Dyer, "the ongoing moment", here brought together within a single frame. Atkinson's images, full of doors and windows – open, closed, sometimes blocked - seem to suggest all the possible paths the inhabitants of the photographs might have taken, but framed and moderated by the expectations and conventions of the society and times that each occupied. Perhaps also, these photographs reference our changing relationship with photography and a more developed awareness of the multifaceted function of the photographic window in our framing of the world.

Garry Winnograd once commented "I photograph to see what things look like when photographed" and Flusser observes that photography is a projection rather than a record. He suggests that Dorothea Lange's photograph of the *Migrant Mother* is no longer just a photograph of Florence Owen Thompson taken in 1936 in California, but "a depiction of any one of us, now or in the future, facing possible suffering with possible dignity." Both comments recognise the transformational aspect of photography, which has always existed; a photograph is not merely a simple depiction of the subject in the real world. So it seems strange that in the minds of many, the digital revolution should create such a crisis for photography. Wim Wenders has stated "the digitized picture has broken the relationship between picture and reality once and for all." This popular view seems to overlook the fact that photographic manipulation has been a part of photography since its inception, take for example Rejlander's, *The Two ways of Life* made in 1857 and composed of a combination of at least 30 images. Maybe the connection between truth, image and reality is more dependent on the context of the photograph rather than the technology.

However, there is undoubtedly a crisis both for photography and for photographers but it seems this may be more concerned with the meaning and reading of the photograph. The millions of images in existence today have over-saturated our senses and the consequence is that many photographs are made and viewed in ways that require little attention to construction or meaning. In this way, we are perhaps losing the ability to discern, reflect, edit and understand the highly complex, coded system involved in the production and reception of the photograph.

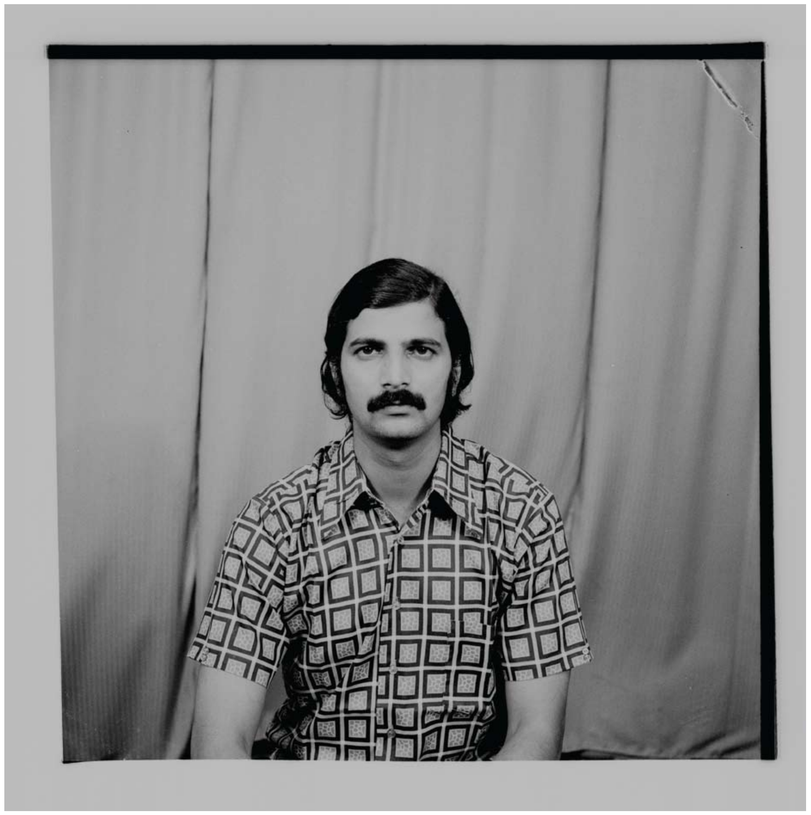
Article by Susan Andrews 2010
Senior Lecturer in Photography
Sir John Cass School of Art, Media and Design, LMU

www.uncertainstates.com

ULKA KARANDIKAR

from '*The Pattern Book*' - exploration of a personal archive.

ulkakarandikar@hotmail.com



I find a photograph of a man my age. I have his eyes. My sister has his eyes. I look across the table at all these eyes. We are talking about my Father's worries. There is a list. My sister marks the paper with her pen; we are trying to help, to understand, to pin him down. We are trying to please him. We are always trying to please him. The man in the photograph will marry my mother; will move to England, father daughters. Unmarried daughters. This is number one on my sister's list. Her neat script captures the thoughts into a black and white English script. She forms a pyramid. She learnt this at business school. Pyramids. The man in the photograph's mother will die when he is in his twenties. The man looking out at me has four sisters. My Father has three. My Father's list is getting longer. He is worried about our Mother's health. My sister draws a heart next to my Mother's name. I smile. The man in the photograph looks tired and certain. My Father looks tired. He closes his eyes. It is only now that I begin to understand. He wants us to be safe. To be married, have children and a job. He wants us to be like the man in the photograph.

AVIV YARON

In Another Place
December 2009 - I am standing on the ground of what used to be Simsim – until 13th May 1948, a Palestinian village with 1500 residents. In the far distance, beyond the fence which surrounds the vast site, I can see a farmer ploughing one of the nearby Kibbutz's fields. The day draws to its end - even the cattle are nowhere to be seen. I am on my own amongst this very traumatic, yet beautiful, landscape. I am surrounded by nature, washed by the golden light of a late afternoon sun aiming west. Amongst these peaceful grounds I can still recognize the traces of what used to be the village. One could identify the remains of a Palestinian village by the remained fruit trees, the prickly pear bushes and the eucalyptus trees which were later planted by the Israelis as part of their attempts to reclaim the land. I notice some dry walls, some remains of old buildings and a well. But mainly I experience the void.

In 1948, Israeli military forces expelled the people of Simsim to the Gaza Strip. Kibbutz Gvar'am, which was established near Simsim in 1942, later took over the village's lands. '…What had once been the centre of the village, including the remains of about 345 buildings, a desecrated cemetery, dry wells and a destroyed mosque, is currently fenced off as the "Kurkar Gevar'am Nature Reserve" and used for the kibbutz cattle…' [http://www.palestineremembered.com/Gaza/Simsim/Story13019.html]. There is not even a sign to commemorate the memory of the life this place had and its native inhabitants. The memory of all that was then is eradicated from the 'here-now'.

The 'decisive moment' marks for me both spiritual and psychological peaks. It captures a state of presence which resonates with, or reflects upon, an inner state of being. The photograph is a decisive moment frozen in time. It records the present in the past – '…the photograph's moment was now…' [Ann Banfield, Camera Obscura, 24, September 1990 p.75]. Barthes's 'punctum' and Freud's 'the uncanny' open up a reading of the photograph which is beyond the possibility of it invoking reminiscence. Here, the photographic experience and the photograph as its product, transcend past reality and the 'now-then' to provide a metaphor for the viewer to resonate with in the 'here-now'.

The photographic 'now-then' and the uncanny that goes with it, do not necessarily invoke memory of, or longing for, that which is missed. The chemical treatment used in this body of work is not an integral part to my photographic experience and the moment of capture. Yet strangely, it links landscape and memory and creates the notion of past time. The chemical effect on the photographic material – the integrated 'damages' – suggest the juxtaposition of an internal memory with the photographic process. In this body of work, it adds the feeling of real time and with it the longing for that which is no more, or for the memory of it. It creates the illusion of the photograph being an authentic representation of the 'now' as it was 'then'. However, the captured reality is eradicated of all physical traces to its past; the chemically overlaid markings provide a sense of loss, and a memory of the 'then'.

www.avivyaron.co.uk

DAMIAN GILLIE

The Mill
This project was originally entitled 'Foster to Rogers', a reference to the names of two great British architects and also the name of the original owner of a Victorian flourmill situated in the centre of Cambridge, England.

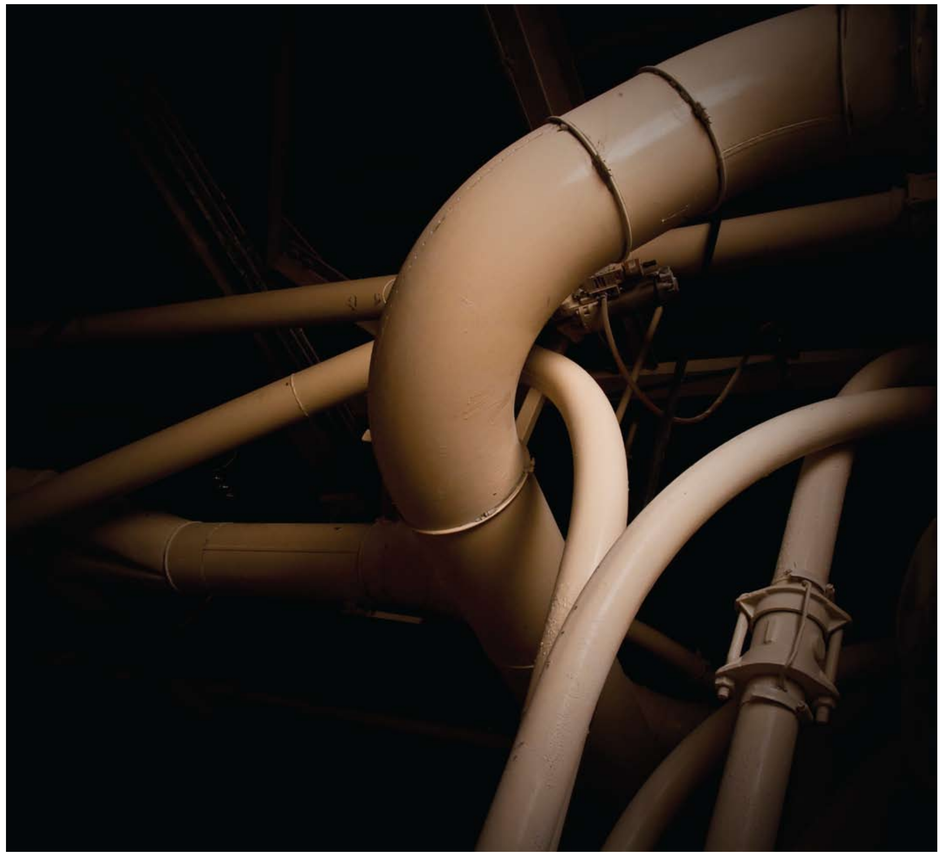
Built in 1895 for the Foster family, the mill changed ownership 3 times before being closed by Rank Hovis in 2000. For the next ten years it remained unaltered, its swirl of internal piping disconnected but left in situ. On 27 March 2010, the original silo was destroyed in a massive fire, and the mill itself was badly damaged. At the time of writing, the future of the surviving building remains unclear. The rest of the twelve-acre site is being developed as new office space and housing, the main tenant being Microsoft with a new HQ for their research arm. The master planner and chief architect is Lord Rogers.

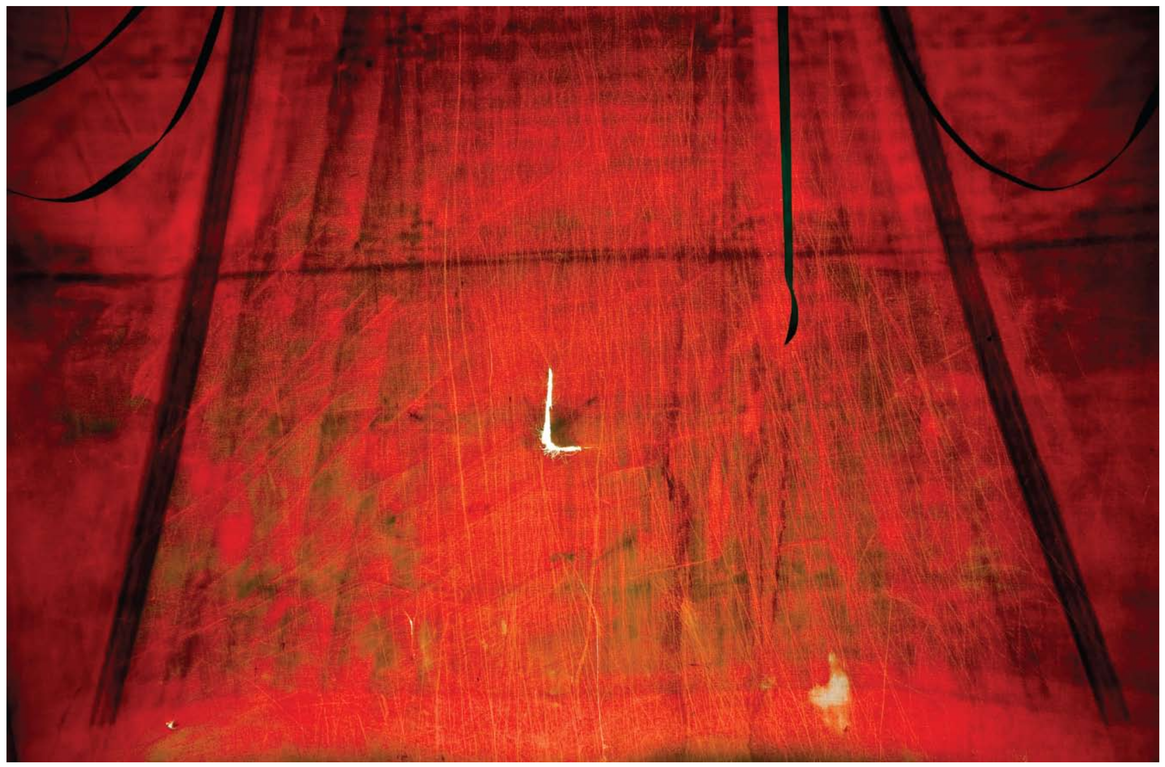
I had no idea as to what lay behind the walls of this massive battlemented edifice, much of it bleak and windowless. What I found was a tangle of pipes and cables almost impenetrable in places. Still with the strong odour of the ingredients, which were processed here, the atmosphere was one of a giant, sunken vessel, silent except for the constant sound of dripping water and the occasional fluttering of some unseen creature.

The subject matter intrigued me for its resemblance to a giant internal organ with its inexplicable arteries and tubes once connected and fully functioning but now dissected and leading nowhere. I thought of the strange irony of how these extraordinary shapes were soon to disappear forever, to be replaced by the designs of an architect well known for exposing many of the internal elements of his buildings, particularly pipe-work, on the exterior.

However, I changed the name of this book to 'MILL' because I wanted the concept to be as simple as possible: a place that had once been designed to the minutest detail for industrial efficiency is now explored as an abstract, sculptural space.

www.damiangillie.com





www.uncertainstates.com

IAN ATKINSON

The Reflective Moment
This work represents a reflective moment; how we are all interrelated with our past, present and future selves and how our lives revolve around these factors. A significant element of this work is the poster within the frame, which reflects the ability of photography to capture a real moment in time and suspend it, making it the focus of our memories. Within this work the poster stands as an iconic representation of the past, alongside the other apparently more tangible figures who have in truth, also been torn from the continuum of time and photographed. The viewer is encouraged to consider the multiplicity of other moments between those judged as significant that have not been recorded and question the nature of our attachment to the still photograph.

www.isaphoto.co.uk

DAVID TOWNEND

George's Place, Los Angeles, 2010
George died a week before his 97th Birthday in the house he had lived in since the 1940's, when he moved there with his wife. She died in 1969, and George lived there for 41 years on his own, until his own death in 2010.

In George's world I was a late arrival…I met him in 1997. As I got to know George it struck me that he must be one of the most fiercely independent, mentally active, unassuming gentlemen I was ever likely to meet. Even in his 90's, he refused to accept domestic help, and even went so far as to deal with troublesome teeth by his own means at home, rather than visit a dentist.

At each meeting I would learn something new. I remember him telling me about his days working in New York in the 1930's for Benton & Bowles, an advertising agency (later to become DMB&B). On another occasion, he described watching with his mother from an upstairs window at his father's tailoring business in Cleveland Ohio, the US soldiers returning home from Europe after the First World War in 1918. He was 4 years old.

When I visited Los Angeles, we used to take him out to a restaurant and talk about 'things'. With George anything was game, but cinema was big. And he really knew his European Art House Cinema. I don't know any other man in their 90's who'd effortlessly reach into their bookcase, hand me a book on Tarkovsky, saying with a glint in their eyes "I thought you'd like to keep this."

George was quality. Pure and Simple.

In life, George was pretty successful at avoiding my camera. I did take some 'interesting' candid portraits of him, but these moments of connection with the camera were fleeting. The images in the series "George's Place" are one last search for George. In Absentia. A Forensic Portrait.

It felt very special and a privilege to be there quietly walking around the house that George had imprinted himself on. Time really did feel like it had stood still. Now he has gone, his things will be cleared up, and the clock may start again.

www.davidtownend.com

UNCERTAIN STATES Issue 04

www.uncertainstates.com

David Townend / Georges place - Year: 2010

‘It’s a thin line between Heaven and here’
The Sir John Cass MA Photography Show in two parts

It’s a thin line between Heaven and here offers an intimate yet unsettling exposé of some of London’s brightest emerging photographers. Falling to that middle ground, the works sit on a knife edge between surreal and distressing, uncomfortable and intriguing. Running as part of Photomonth, ‘It’s a thin line between Heaven and here’ is curated by William F. Cooper

Gallery East
214 Brick Lane
London
E1 6SA

Nov 3rd-19th 2010

Part One Preview Thursday 4th 7PM
Part Two preview Thursday 11th 7PM

Uncertain States is a lens-based artist co-operative who are passionate to create and promote visual imagery. In this volatile global climate the work reflects some of our current concerns and challenges how perception is formed in our society on issues as diverse as politics, religion, and personal identity. For your on-line copy, visit **www.uncertainstates.com** or e-mail **info@UncertainStates.com** for a hard copy.

We welcome submissions from lens-based artists for further publication. For all enquiries please contact **info@uncertainstates.com**

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