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Citer ce compte rendu
Anima Mundi brings together nine British photographers (of whom only seven are discussed here due to space limitations) under the genre of still life photography. Still life presents a selection and ordering of objects, a tableau of images, which was previously associated with a display of personal wealth. The modern representation of this idea in photography, as depicted through the practice of collage and investigation in postmodern theory, displays personal choice as caught up in the complexity of political and social systems. In this case, the wealth is one of reciprocal concerns constructed by both a viewer and an artist of similar social context.

Images of wealth and reward are still portrayed through advertising and media. The photographs of Don McAllester attempt, with partial success, to disrupt that process of seeing/desiring/owning. Once part of the advertising industry, McAllester is sensitive to the manipulation of the image and its appeal to the consumer. He bifurcates his images with mirrors, splitting or confounding the photographed object(s) with the intention of leaving the viewer disoriented. However, his own images appeal through his attention to textures and the remnants of the works’ geometric basis. The photograph itself as object enters consumer culture, albeit by the back door. The curator, Martha Langford, further complicates matters when, in the catalogue accompanying the show, she notes McAllester’s “work reminds us of the vulgarization of the still life” through its participation in sales and advertising. She refers to the genre as if it were a pure art form, in effect isolating it. Moreover, it is difficult for an art object both to disrupt our desire to possess and to maintain an aesthetically crafted and pleasing appearance.

Keith Arnatt’s photographs display another approach to this issue. Arnatt photographs garbage: soup tins, chicken bones, chunks of raw meat — all in full Fuji colour. Arnatt has stated that he is not explicitly making an environmental statement (he once described garbage bags in a dump as “glittering like jewels in a landscape”). His photographs, rather, are concerned with art history and artistic practices. He is an interdisciplinary who condemns the categorization of artistic media.

Arnatt’s work is polemical. His slick photographs of garbage question the criteria of suitable subjects for photography. Further, Arnatt references...
his genre to historically validated painters such as Caspar David Friedric, Samuel Palmer, and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. Arnatt’s emphasis on the found garbage object in the landscape also contends with our idea of nature as pastoral. By not politically “soap boxing” his subject matter, he frees the viewer to examine issues normally taken for granted.

Ron O’Donnell also wishes to avoid political reductionism. He uses the same subject matter as Arnatt, but in a more theatrical manner. His installation work for the show was a garbage waterfall: cascading water depicted by rows of discarded ‘natural springs’ water jugs; the surrounding banks a heap of painted cardboard, tin cans, and the like. The humour and staginess of his work (“nature” represented by plastic frogs and chickens) is surrealist in its sensibility.

The installation, however, demonstrates the problem of using garbage itself as a medium in the pristine gallery space. The installation was too neat. Why not fill the whole art gallery with garbage? This question leads us to another aspect of both Arnatt’s and O’Donnell’s work — its commodity value. Although their work is well crafted, their subject matter is not appealing and so does not easily enter the art market system.

The sorting and choosing of what is important to us, and its placement within focus (of the camera lens, or perhaps a theoretical grid) is also seen in the works of Verdi Yahooda and Oladélé Bamgboyé. In a series of photographs Yahooda gathered small, “unimportant” articles from her mother’s home into a container such as a milk jug. In the next photograph they are split onto a tray, and then arranged into groups in a third. Above this sequence is another of seeds spilt onto a tray, and then arranged into groups in a third.

The photographs are lit from above by theatre spotlights and the entire room is painted a deep purple. The photographs are lit from above by theatre spotlights and the entire room is painted a deep purple.

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