

## Glowing

Camilla Jackson 2004

Recent work by Sian Bonnell is intriguing as it combines beguiling beauty with unnerving simplicity of execution. These richly coloured prints are of luminous objects which seem to have been discovered by the artist in the landscape. Suffused by mist these unidentified glowing things appear to have light emanating from them. This gives them a strange other-worldly appearance. However on closer inspection their prosaic and domestic origin becomes clear, as colanders and jelly moulds are deciphered in amongst the blades of grass. It is the scale and heightened colours; the glorious pinks, artificial greens, radiant yellows and vivid oranges that render these items unfamiliar.

Bonnell, who trained as a sculptor, has always created interventions that she has for a number of years recorded in her photographs. Her works document a series of fleeting and temporary acts. This working process developed whilst she was bringing up a young family and no longer had a studio in which to create work. So instead, in the limited time she had available, she developed a portable set of props from her home that she could take outside around her house in Dorset. By placing these objects outside she conflates two traditionally male genres that of still life and landscape art.

To take symbols as the subject of her work that are from the domestic arena of cookery cannot solely be seen to have arisen from a practical impetus. If it were simply that it would be too easy to dismiss the work as visual puns due to their whimsical quality. In art historical terms the use of this familiar, intimate and highly feminised language has very clear precedents that derive from the early interventions made by the Feminist art movement in the United States, and particularly the project **Womanhouse** (1971). Artists involved with this such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro used household items, in this case, to make an installation within an actual home, in order to find ways to speak from what they considered to be the domestic confines of their lives. One cannot but, for example, look at Bonnell's work **Ham Sandwich** (2003) from her series **Serving Suggestions** in which she placed slices of Luncheon-meat with a hard boiled egg centre as kitchen tiles on the wall, without thinking back to the kitchen in the above project where fried eggs were placed on the ceiling. **Womanhouse** was a potent and significant moment in time that was a key part of a movement that sought to give voice to women's art production. In a much more subtle, and one has to note poetic and allegorical way, Bonnell's work uses a very similar language, but changes the context further by placing things outside.

By doing this there is a clear element of discovery in the work, of experiencing these familiar objects afresh. This is further emphasised by the slightly out-of-focus blurred edges to the photographs so that the items are never completely revealed to us. In this way and also due to the fact that the artist chooses to place the camera on, or very close to, the ground the viewpoint is very child-like. But this reference to childhood again is not only literal, but also metaphorical, as the work inhabits a dream like world of apparent fantasy. It is as though these works are visions of things that have landed from outer space discovered nestled in the grass. Their appearance does bear an almost uncanny similarity to the way that in some classic science fiction movies such as **The Blob** (1968) amorphous human eating plasma like beings have been depicted. In this way it relates to the common held perception of how aliens would appear should they land on earth, however unfeasible it might be that a life form would take the form of a quivering mound of jelly.

The way that this work can be seen as a leap into this arena of fantasy and fiction relates it to a much earlier series of black and white photographs taken by two young girls known as the **Cottingley Fairies** (@1919). These now incredulous, yet charming and delightful images, appear to show a girl who has not only been lucky enough to find Fairies at the bottom of her garden, but has also been able to capture an image of herself with these tiny and delicate beings. This series of images became known as one of the most notorious hoaxes in the history of photography. It convinced so many at the time in part as they were taken when so few had first hand experience of taking photographs, but also when so many believed the photographic process to have mystical and alchemic properties. One of the most ardent advocates for the veracity of these images was the leading crime writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In retrospect it would seem that not only was he prone to believe these images were

real because he himself was a spiritualist ,a movement that tried to use photography to prove in the existence of other beings, but also a man that clearly saw little girls as angelic and innocent creatures who simply did not have the capacity to be so canny and mischievous as to construct the images. But more than that what this anecdotal precursor to Bonnell's work reveals is that both sets of photographs ask the viewer, even if only briefly, to suspend their sense of disbelief. In this way the magic of these works, both past and present, is that it demonstrates that even today it is not that seeing is believing, but more that we see what we wish to believe.

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