

for Ffotogallery

Sian Bonnell: poetic fictions

Sian Bonnell's latest series of light-box works, *Glowing*, presents us with a number of mysterious and beautiful images in which, by the magical alchemy of photography, banal domestic objects - jelly moulds, colanders, plates and glasses - are transfigured into luminous objects that have arrived - who knows how? - from an elsewhere unknown. Emancipated from a familiar order of things, alienated from the quotidian domestic, they are charged with an energy whose imaginary sources we cannot guess at. If *They Came*, the title of the series when exhibited as photographic prints at Hirshl in 2003, deliberately evoked those science-fiction films of the 'fifties and 'sixties in which the earth was being constantly visited by things from outer space, the atmospheric and lucent intensity of these images, and the evident reality of their *mis-en-scène* - a function of specifically photographic persuasion - takes them beyond the creaky theatricality that added hilarity to the (false and faked) alarm that greeted the movie arrival of unlikely aliens.

They are images of a kind quite different to those of Bonnell's earlier series such as *When the Domestic Meets the Wild* and *Putting Hills in Holland*. Much of that earlier work achieves its effects - sometimes gently humorous and charming, sometimes simply comically absurd, sometimes disquietingly complex and ambiguous - through what might be called ironies of displacement. In the former, domestic objects with specific functions, or toys whose proper place is in the domestic nursery, are set in 'natural' locations inappropriate to their utility; in the latter, they are arranged into incongruous quasi-sculptural configurations or constructed into extravagant *personnages*. The implications of such displacements and reconfigurations are directly derived from our recognition of the objects, relating to our knowledge of their everyday uses, and to our sense of the incongruity of their *plein air* settings. Their synthetic colours and manufactured textures (plastic, glass, metal) emphasise their alienation from their new surroundings.

On the other hand, the settings themselves - fenced farmland, roadside edge, beach, copse and cut reed-bed - are anything but truly 'wild': they are not landscapes conceived as representing the 'natural world', or as having any aspect of the sublime about them. The placing of the objects - tea cloths, cuddly lambs, plastic models, pastry cutters, jelly moulds (and sometimes the jellies made in them), scrubbing pads etc. - do not have the character of aesthetic interventions, 'art-acts'; they seem to be, rather, of a class of actions, which, though strange, are well within the compass of the 'housewife' or domestic worker to whom the images ironically allude. Mops are stood up in a neat rank (on the beach), scrubbing pads are strung out in a row to dry (on hillside barbed wire fences), tea cloths hang out to air (on a branch in a wooded copse), jelly moulds and custard tarts are neatly stacked (on a polder floor). Their disposition is, if anything, advertently *inartistic*.

If feather dusters acquire suddenly the propensities of exotic flowers, or coloured plastic pegs cling like butterflies to hanging leaves, or plastic scourers appear at dawn like brilliant fungi on a woodland floor, they signal the implication that modern nature is itself denatured, the 'wild' is in fact domesticated, and suggest that these transformations are, as we say, quite natural, in the sense that they are predictably in order. (As, for example, all societies tend to think of their own typifying conventions as 'natural'.) If there is no wild nature, then that which belongs to the human world belongs wherever it finds itself in that world. As 'at home' as a red corrugated-iron barn in a green field, say. It was, of course, the subversive transgression of a rebellious nature (albeit a rather 'tame' rebellion) which so arbitrarily *de-* or *re-* contextualised and *de-* or *re-* classified the familiar object. (What, the observer asks, is this artist playing at?) As all this demonstrates, multiplying ironies make it difficult to put one's finger on what actually is happening in those photographs, what it is that makes them disconcert. Several things are happening, of course, at the same time. Certainly it is nothing so simple, or as recognisably gestural, as a feminist protest against the domestic, though that may be our initial assumption.

In the earlier series, the objects so comically or disturbingly displaced *retain*, nevertheless, their identity, precisely because it is their *resemblance* to other things of quite different orders (natural, sculptural; minimal, modernist, surreal) that is exploited for comic or ironic effects (simple or complex). With those objects in those photographs we do know to that extent where we are. The objects in *Glowing*, have, however, undergone another, deeper, kind of transformation. Where are we when we first glimpse these translucent presences? It is as if we have just come across them, encountered them unexpected in the crepuscular thicket, half-hidden by the damp grass or leafmould, or been mystified by their cold clarity on the crisply frozen turf. 'It is as if': that is, we may know they are staged arrangements, set-ups, but we encounter these images as having the quality of the *poetic*.

To turn Coleridge's famous prescription on its head, we are tricked momentarily into an *involuntary* 'suspension of disbelief'. (Coleridge wrote of our experience of the theatre as necessarily entailing the 'willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith': we *will* ourselves to believe that what is happening onstage is 'real'.) Film and photography are unlike theatre or performance in precisely this respect: we are screened from the sound, smell and atmosphere of the contingent, the creaky actuality of things, by the silver chemistry of the process and the lucent surface of the presentation. Without an act of the will, a deliberation to accept the provisional reality of a fiction, we believe in, however momentarily, what is, transparently, an artifice. With regard to (in looking at) the images in the *Glowing* series it is a conviction engendered by the homogeneity of the image, the completeness of the fiction, in terms of both material form (surface, light, colour: the constituents of their 'beauty') and content (the objects partially disclosed, partially hidden, their strange unearthly inner light, their appearance as of arrival in a believable but unexpected place: the constituents of their uncanny 'mystery').

This is what happens in art; and the 'special effects' of the most advanced technologies of visual trickery (in photography, in film) cannot enhance the magic of that moment of *belief*, the special property of experience that permeates the encounter with *poetic truth*. It is necessary to our reading of fiction and to poetry; it is the essential aspect of looking at paintings, whether figurative or abstract. Amazingly, though, any old sci-fi B film can work the effect (as Bonnell implies in her evocations of them) although, as my use of the term 'theatrical' above was intended to suggest, certain obvious devices break the spell and bring us back to earth, so to speak, or to our cinema seat. It is a function of criticism to evaluate the relative qualities of these varieties of aesthetic experience. What is especially surprising is that the magic can happen again and again, with each renewed encounter with a painting in a church or a gallery, or each re-viewing in cinema's dark Platonic cave, and even as we look with half an eye at re-runs in the corner of the lighted living room.

Each time, however, is different. With *Glowing*, our acknowledgement of the artifice behind the poetic effects and our recognition of the materials adds something at each re-visit, each review, to our experience: a complex irony. Not the easy irony of amusement at our 'seeing through' the transparent trickery, even as we enjoy its effects; rather, the deeper sense of reality conceived as multiple, compounded of what is perceived, what is known, what is remembered and what is imagined: the profound irony which consists in holding poised in the mind oppositions or contradictions in which each of the terms is equally true. Bonnell's uncannily luminous arrivals from somewhere else are at once strange and strangely familiar: there is nothing 'homely' about them. Alive with an inner light, like fire or ice, they have come to inhabit a region at the back of the mind: they have landed in the domain of art. The actual is but a portion of the phenomenal, and the imagination comprehends both in its creative transformations into art of the world as given. They are, more precisely, somewhere beyond the conventional secondary worlds (the *genres*) of still life and landscape, and most certainly outside the categories of photographic documentation. They are poetic: they are *fictions*.

Contradictions, oppositions, ambiguities are the solvents of the unconscious, out of which an imagery emerges in dreams and reveries, an oneiric imagery which has its origins in that faculty that Coleridge called 'fancy': 'a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space' but '[receiving] all its materials ready made from the law of association.' These later images of Sian Bonnell's are indeed 'fanciful' in this sense, but they have as well a deeper *imaginative* reality. That is to say, they persuade us that the world they picture is of a piece, it exists with the same kind of self-contained coherence that informs any effective work of art, any convincing painting, say, of a supernatural, or for that matter, a natural, event.

As I have suggested, this is an imaginatively transformative photography, different in kind from that of those earlier series (including, as well as those I have mentioned, *Waterworks*, *Mont Saint Michel Souvenirs*) in which the photography was essentially instrumental and reflexive, having as its purpose the record of what was self-evidently staged by the photographer. In those

earlier works the wit - sharp and generous, comic and complicated - was in the intelligence of the conception and the deadpan *actualité* of the demonstration. In *Glowing* and in the silver images here presented in *Pinholes* and certain of the images in *Gamma*, the game is deepened: the camera becomes the means not so much to thoughtful provocation as to an address to the mind and the spirit, to levels of affect and contemplation untouched by the earlier work. We are presented with a new kind of photographic art.

Mel Gooding May 2004

Coleridge is quoted from *Biographia Literaria* (Chaps. 12 and 13) where he defines and distinguishes between 'fancy' and 'imagination'. Where the 'fancy' is a function of memory and association and operates creatively through a conscious *choice* of materials, the 'imagination' operates at a deeper level. As a 'prime agent of all human perception', an essential aspect of *being*, 'it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create... It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as objects*) are essentially fixed and dead.' Imagination is, then, the faculty that actively animates the objects in the world with constantly changing meanings. 'This power ... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant properties: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects....'