

High Jinks and Black Jokes: the Art of Sian Bonnell
by Mark Haworth-Booth

Sian Bonnell was born in London in 1956 and attended a Catholic primary school where she learned about guilt and the soul. Sian saw the soul clearly. It was suspended inside her like a white table-cloth or sometimes a doily. Hers urgently needed washing. A plastic glow-in-the-dark Virgin Mary gleamed from her bedside table.

Sian studied sculpture at Chelsea School of Art in 1978-81. She opened up to the extraordinary opportunities available in those relatively grant-rich days – when most materials came free - and to the stimulus offered by London's galleries and theatres. She arrived at Chelsea the term after Helen Chadwick left, met her briefly and saw all of her major installations over the next few years. There are interesting resonances between the two artists – for example in their teasing feminism, their use of domestic items for art-making (both made startling transformations of cleaning materials), the use of high and low technologies and their gleeful interest in bad taste and black jokes. Like many students at the time, Sian found much to admire in the work of Eva Hesse, shown at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1979. Hesse demonstrated, among many other things, a simple but useful truth - that the same objects could be used in a variety of separate art works.

Although Sian has a broad appreciation of Western art, including a passion for Piero della Francesca, she has a predilection for intimiste, domestic artists such as Chardin, Morandi, Gwen John and Winifred Nicolson. She became fascinated in her final year by the 'Red Studio' of Matisse, then on loan to the Tate. Sian created her own 'Red Studio' in her space at Chelsea and placed her sculptures within it. **(Fig.1)** Her sculptures at the time were brightly coloured transformations of stools and chairs found on skips or purloined from the canteen. Her overpowering red space was followed by a 'blue cube' made in her final year– a space (top-lit through slats), its walls splashed with many layers of mainly blue pigment. Terry Frost came to see the blue cube and spent the day talking with Sian about its 'transcendental' qualities and its relation to theatre. She worked part-time at the Royal Court and wrote a thesis on Samuel Beckett's precise control over sets and props, as laid down in the texts of his plays. Her knowledge of the Theatre of the Absurd underlies the work by which she has become well-known 20 years later, although Jacques Tati and favourite B movies like *The Blob* also play their parts. She helped build sets for a production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Old Vic and afterwards photographed the production. She wanted to take up a place to study theatre design at the Slade but this was financially impossible. Instead Sian took up theatre photography. With waitressing, she was able to survive economically and to work as an artist.

Sian left London to do a part-time post-graduate degree in Newcastle, partly as a result of a fire which destroyed most of her existing work. She recalls making a photographic series in her studio about the way sunlight travels around a space, placing objects in pools of light. **(Fig.2)** She thought her other sculptural work was uninspired and artificial but received her MA in 1985. She moved back to London, married and worked alongside her husband photographing art work and exhibitions.

She exhibited in a number of group shows in the late 1980s: Helen Chadwick selected two photographic pieces – including this remarkable vision of the convent of San Marco in Florence – for the exhibition *Time* at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (1988). **(Fig.3)** Children, economic and space constraints led to a re-location out of London to the South West in 1991.

Sian talks of her life in a Dorset village as like ‘a very long instalment of *The Archers*’. She recalls herself, as a young mother, ‘baking for England’ - like Sylvia Plath in Devon 30 years earlier. The birth of her son was experienced as a highly creative moment, followed soon afterwards by the fulfilment given by the birth of a second boy. She managed to organise her domestic life to allow some time for photography by 1993 and in 1994 exhibited landscapes in *Viewfindings* selected by Liz Wells. Sian often gathered shells, pebbles or feathers on family walks and brought them home. In 1996 she reversed the process by taking domestic objects, such as biscuit-cutters, into the landscape and photographing them in situ. Tin sheep glint from dry-stone walls or fence posts in grazing land. **(Fig.4)** The shining animals in silhouette echo their historic (and sometimes prehistoric) counterparts – the horses cut into the green turf to reveal the white chalk. Sian’s tiny interventions also miniaturise the world. If the animals seem as vulnerable as toddlers, so does the world around them. The small black and white photographs look backward and forward across time and ask questions about our internal diagrams of Nature and its famous foil, Culture. Glittering metal rabbit moulds appeared in the landscape, followed by pink blancmange and bionic, green jelly rabbits. **(Fig.5)** Such kiddies’ party creatures looked rather different in the fields, resonating subtly with the controversies around the irradiation of food-stuffs and the warning bells ringing around the letters BSE. (The jelly itself – in these artificial replacements of natural animals - was made from animal gelatine.) The resonances continue. A bright green rabbit dashes through the pages of Margaret Atwood’s *Orix and Crake* (2003). When I first saw these works, at a conference on landscape photography at Falmouth College of Arts in 1998, they seemed almost defiantly modest. This was the age of *Sensation* (Royal Academy, 1997) and the apotheosis of the YBAs. Sian’s first solo exhibition - *Groundings* at Watershed, Bristol - came later in 1998. Alongside the *Groundings* series, Sian was working on *Undercurrents*, in which domestic objects appeared on the sea-shore. Sian teasingly opposes the assumed positions of the female/internal/domestic and the habitually male/external/landscape. Soft toys and the momentary impressions left by biscuit-cutters occupied the rugged coastline. The more I saw of the developing work, the more I recognised that if the images seemed whimsical their author must possess a whim of iron. The images insisted on the frailty of human constructions – and yet seemed to thrive on this knowledge.

The humour became both more flippant and more poetic in the series *When the domestic meets the wild* (1999). In an inspired move, Sian turned her circumstances as an artist - enforced domesticity but (ironically) no studio in which to work – into a creative opportunity. She took even more of the home outside. A duster (perhaps recalling Sian’s early idea of the soul) alights on a bush. An ironing-board perches on a rocky shore **(Fig.6)** and starts to become something else - a wading bird intent on its scavenging, its stiff limbs designed by millions of evolutionary years in precisely this remarkable form. It is odd how waders, especially the larger ones like herons, look improvised, as if they have metal joints. Or is this a picture of a surf board that has evolved legs to wade ashore for a breather from the endless, boring waves? Such

works recall Sian's love of Beckett and the Absurd. They relate too to the stripped-down metaphysics and glinting wit of such Central European poets of the mid-20th century as Zbigniew Herbert. In his prose poem 'Objects' we read that 'Inanimate objects are always correct and cannot, unfortunately, be reproached with anything...tables, even when they are tired, will not dare to bend their knees'.(1) As we read that, Herbert's tables simultaneously preserve their decorum and seem, surreptitiously, to bend their knees.

Groundings opened up teaching opportunities and other shows. A move to Weymouth in 1998 brought a permanent studio and larger darkroom facilities. In 2001 Sian received an award from South West Arts. It meant recognition as well as the opportunity to travel to Holland in 2001 to make the series *Putting Hills in Holland*. She worked with both a medium format camera and 5x4 pinhole. One of the series was included in *Seeing Things: Photographs of Objects 1850-2001* at the V&A in 2002. (Fig.7) It took its place in a section devoted to still lives made only to be photographed, a world of temporary – often dream-like - illusions that is one of the most intriguing strains in contemporary image-making. The nonchalant nonsense of Sian's image made it the ideal poster-image for the exhibition.(2) However, the pictures offer more than high jinks in the Low Countries and do more than displace the domestic: the constructions possess a strange presence as they occupy space and are enveloped by the weather. Like all Sian's series, they move the mental furniture around.

When the domestic meets the wild, an exhibition at Bridport Art Centre in 2001, presented work from 1999-2001. The 30 black and white and colour photographs were augmented by an installation featuring resin moulds laid on green-grocers' grass. Although Sian thought the installation unsuccessful, the resin moulds play a key role in the series *Glowing* shown here. A new series, *Serving Suggestion*, featured in the group show *Play with your food* at the Houston Center for Photography (2003). Some of the *Serving Suggestion* photographs, like *Ham Sandwich*, are very Beckettian.(Fig.8) Luncheon-meat slices posing as kitchen-tiles may satirise the current, TV-engulfing fad for the house beautiful – but as black jokes they are genuinely funny and horribly memorable.(Fig.9) The *Glowing* series, with its engaging mix of the post-Apocalyptic and sci-fi schlock, was shown as *They Came* at her London gallery, Hirschl Contemporary Art, in 2003. The present exhibition and catalogue take the presentation of Sian's work to a very welcome and deserved new plane.

1. This essay is based on an interview with Sian Bonnell for the Oral History of British Photography, which is part of the National Sound Archive at the British Library. The interview took place on 7-8 April 2004.
2. Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, Manchester: Carcanet 1985, p.63.
3. See Mark Haworth-Booth and Marina Warner, *Things: A Spectrum of Photography 1850-2001*, London: V&A Publications and Jonathan Cape, to be published in October 2004.