

Uncanny Vision: Recent photographs of Micheila Petersfield and Simon Cuthbert

The two bodies of work presented in this exhibition may appear worlds apart. The photographs of Micheila Petersfield focus on the artfully fetishized female body; and Simon Cuthbert's work on architectural forms deliberately devoid of the human presences which should animate them. Yet, the two artists share a vision which persistently renders the familiar unfamiliar, confounding easy recognition, resulting in unsettling – at times melancholy, at times odd, and at others macabre – effects on the viewer.

In considering the separate and compound effect of these works and attempting to provide a frame in which they may be viewed, the concept of the uncanny is useful for its psychological resonances and its recourse to the unconscious. The uncanny – or in the German *unheimlich*¹ – refers to the familiar made unfamiliar, as in familiar or everyday objects placed in unfamiliar, even taboo, contexts. The uncanny effect may be unsettling, incongruous, even nightmarish. Thus in the photographs of Petersfield and Cuthbert we are presented with apparently recognisable scenes from suburbs, bedrooms and public spaces, whose contours we assume we know. Then we are shocked, unsettled or made melancholy by mis-recognition.

Micheila Petersfield is a Tasmanian-based emerging photographer whose work is “focused on the idea of destabilising photographic ideals of female representation by reconstructing them as awry self-portraits. By deconstructing femininity and refiguring it from an altered perspective, those symbols that are girlish and beautiful adopt a darker and strange meaning.”² Petersfield is model, photographer and producer/dramaturge in these works, and by means of these multiple roles asserts technical and artistic authority in the vexed field of the representation of the female body.

Petersfield's photographs are richly evocative and intertextual. They reveal and play with a range of influences which include, among many, the photographs of Cindy Sherman and Tracey Moffatt. At their most gorgeous, the surfaces of Petersfield's images participate in and complicate the aesthetics of glossy high fashion photography, perhaps best exemplified in the interplay of high gloss vermilion nail polish on finger nails and dripping from the severed stem of a rose in the troubling image, **Pink Roses**. Petersfield's work also participates critically in vernacular modes of female self-representation as expressed through MySpace, Facebook, Instagram and the ubiquitous selfie. Petersfield's vernacular vocabulary also includes cinema noir (as in **Girl in a Doorway**) and echoes of schlock.

¹ The concept of the *unheimlich*, while in some currency from the mid-nineteenth century was fixed by Sigmund Freud in the 1919 essay, 'Das Unheimlich.'

² Micheila Petersfield, Artist's Statement, 2017.

For all their beauty, Petersfield's images are not easy to view. Petersfield positions her fragile and demure form within the reach of apparent harm, possibly self-harm, as evoked most pointedly in the photograph **Snip** in which the scissors suggest possible uses beyond the dressmaking which is the immediate reference. In this image, the gaze of the camera, revealing the subject from behind, is a menace: the vulnerability of the subject in her yet to be fully assembled dress are uneasily registered through the camera's angle and the proximity of the scissors to her own hand in one corner of the frame. A similarly unnerving effect is produced in **Peephole**, in which Petersfield photographs herself again from behind kneeling almost child-like and peeping through a hole in a wall – part peep hole, part the glory hole of pornography. This is Alice gone awry. This voyeuristic assemblage with the viewer watching the peeping girl balances on the edge of menace and perversion.

A more overt sense of danger is conveyed in **Pink House** in which a glamorous and deathly pale female figure appears to take flight from a threatening domestic space imaged in the pink house in the background. While this image shows the subject front on and is marked by her presence in an exterior scene, the background – bathed in pink – resonates with unspecified, familiar yet unknown, menace. The engaged re-scripting of the colour pink in many of these images is confronting: pink signals ambiguity, menace and harm.

The unsettling effect continues in a different register in the selection of recent works by Simon Cuthbert which constitute a photographic rumination on architectural obsolescence, emptiness and oddity. In this selection of recent works, Cuthbert returns to themes and interests which inform his earlier works primarily the rich interplay between the spaces created by and through architecture, political power and the scope within these for individual expression – even survival. In this body of work, Cuthbert draws on a range of influences which include the work of German conceptual artist Ursula Schulz Dornburg and her evocation of *the architecture of waiting*.³ For Cuthbert, Schulz Dornburg's work is an "enquiry into the mundane and ordinary architecture of the eastern bloc [that] so richly evokes the suppressed creative spirit."⁴ Like Schulz Dornburg's work, Cuthbert's images capture architecture in the service of grand ideals or ideology, or quotidian utility which, with the passage of time and the end of epochs, is oddly transformed to appear like sad remnants of another world or a world only accessible through memory. Nostalgia, regret and longing permeate many of these images.

As with the work of Petersfield, Cuthbert's photographs are richly intertextual. Cuthbert pays homage to the work of other artists as he captures and plays with architectural allusions in some of the buildings featured. Thus, in **Shiloh**, we see the extraordinary pastiche of a suburban home in Brisbane, which combines curved Mediterranean white

³ See http://www.schulz-dornburg.info/english/Presse/Architecture-of-Waiting_Thorn-Prikker.html

⁴ Simon Cuthbert, Artist's Statement, 2017.

stucco walls and an oddly incongruent fragment of picket fencing, in decay, graced with the name Shiloh, the biblical house of worship of the sons of the Israelites.

In **Alma Mater**, Cuthbert applies his uncompromising eye to a piece of brutalist landscape architecture, a garden seat a top of short flight of stairs. The scene, which is redolent of ancient architectural features undisturbed for ages through the thick layering of fallen leaves on all concrete surfaces complicates several assumed relations and the significance they bestow, such as that between the ancient and the modern, and between viewing positions. As with all of these images, there is no evidence of the human use or presence for which this space was devised. They become through Cuthbert's lens strangely haunted by both their author's intentions, whether ideological or utilitarian, and their empty present. Many of the remnants captured in Cuthbert's lens are haunted by their emptiness and obsolescence.

Spaces designed for specific purposes – the viewing of films, watching football games, taking a smoke break from the routine of the psychiatric ward – are revealed in Cuthbert's photograph as abstracted, neglected and distanced by time and disuse from their intended utility. In this distance and neglect, they are transformed into strange, melancholy spaces of regret and longing.

However, Cuthbert's work is not without humour. There is also scope in his uncanny vision for the quirky and comically incongruous as in **Local Business**, an image of PVC piping worked – no doubt by an ingenious plumber – to form the telephone number of this business. The oddity of the crudely formed numbers and their bright red paint jars with the surrounding landscape, but speaks to the recourse made to things which are at hand and the uses to which they may be put. For all their oddity, the primitive red numbers wrought from pipe have a surprising, wry eloquence.

The photographs of Petersfield and Cuthbert repay close viewing. These two artists, one at the beginning of her career and the other mature in his, challenge our perceptions and assumptions with their unflinching commitment to seeing things other, foiling easy viewing and settled judgements. They impress also with their technical and artistic proficiency.

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Author's biography

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