

Working in the Dark

Working in the Dark, an installation by Lea Andrews comprising five works based on photographs, exhibits a fashionable mix of the personal and the political, a blending of Freudian introspection and military action.¹ Three pieces consist of large prints stuck onto canvas and suspended in space: of these, two large triptychs form a pair in which each of the corresponding sections are similar: the left portion shows weaponry, the right garden implements, the centre photographs of part of the body. *Ethnic Cleansing (South Oxfordshire)* is a greatly enlarged school photograph in which the eyes of various pupils and the teacher have been blanked out (as if to protect their anonymity) and light shines through the pellet holes which cluster about their hearts. In the centre of the gallery lies *Bomb Victim*, a print of an Action Man, blown up to the size of a person, and laid on real straw bales. Gauze binds the stump of one abbreviated plastic leg, and in one hand he clutches a snapshot of a small boy. Finally, *Market Forces*, five T-shirts with photographs printed on them, hangs high up in the gallery as if on a washing line but also occupying the traditional position of icons.

Andrews previous work has included expressive documentary photography,² and his half mocking collages which splice grand monuments into the unassuming environment of his home village. For the current installation, however, he states that in exploring an unspecified childhood trauma, he ‘wanted to be more mysterious’.³ The triptychs, at least, are initially somewhat puzzling. In *That Was Then, This is Now (You Know I’ve Always Loved You)* the grime of the tools and the complex surface of the planks forming the background contrast with the shotguns’ sleek allure. In *Circumcision (My Wounded Little Soldier)* the brute shapes of axes are set alongside blunt bodily extremities, cut by their frames and threatened with the proximity of edged weapons. Yet it takes only a few moments to realise how closely these images relate to fashionable psychoanalytic concerns with fetishism, the phallus and castration. Since they were created by rummaging in sheds, excavating and exhibiting his father’s ‘tools’, they heavily allude to Oedipal themes: indeed Andrews sees the spades as metaphoric tools for digging up his childhood secrets. Transference and condensation are

¹Lea Andrews, *Working in the Dark*, is on show at Camerawork, Bethnal Green until 20th February.

²A sequence about a rat-catcher was seen in *The Invisible City*, a group exhibition shown at the Photographers’ Gallery, London in 1990.

³Lea Andrews, *Working in the Dark*, 12 page catalogue, unpaginated.

rife, in the way that tools might become weapons, feet phalluses, and in the vague images of wrapped heads in *Market Forces* which might equally be victims or aggressors. Using the triptych form evokes altarpieces, and it is no surprise that Freudian drama is overlaid with references to crucifixion—body parts, including suitably arrayed hands and feet, are nailed to planks. In this way Andrews preciously identifies his personal trauma with themes of redemption and resurrection (another excavation). The backdrop of the triptychs, shed walls, form flat screens which act as registers of the picture plane, their grain alluding to film. Their scratched graffiti are an arcane writing, commenting on the objects, while the knot holes are literal marks of ‘punctum’ in Barthes’ sense, cracks in the otherwise seamless armour of representation. In *Circumcision* an eye stares out of one hole, ‘returning the gaze’. At one point Baudrillard thought of violence as the only force which could break through the simulacrum,⁴ and the holes piercing representation in the triptychs and *Ethnic Cleansing* may make reference to this view. Contemporary theory has of course identified the photographic medium with the presentation of death and Andrews doggedly exploits this theme. By including photos within his prints he indicates to the viewer an awareness of the medium. What Andrews proposes as a ‘taxonomic grouping of tools’ relates psychoanalytic themes to the supposedly male qualities of instrumental (tool-wielding) rationality, and to Foucauldian theories about the role of photography in serving it. Taxonomy, self-reference, fetishism, the market and world affairs; Andrews is making all the right noises.

When the installation is taken as a whole, the viewer is supposed to make connections between individual trauma and greater conflicts, the key to this being the photograph clutched by the Action Man. Yet these links are neither new nor very interesting. Old school photos are poignant before being riddled with pellets; ‘ethnic cleansing’ is terrible but we don’t need Andrews to tell us this (and he doesn’t have anything new to say about it). Comments on commercialisation are all very well, but take on an ironic air in the light of what Andrews is actually doing. Installation, the inclusion of real objects, and most of all the gluing of photographs onto canvas, while purporting to blur the opposition between photography and fine art, are in themselves a blatant accommodation to the gallery environment and the fine art market.

In the catalogue Andrews claims that he wanted to make images emerge from his subconscious, and thus be slightly out of control. They are hardly this: rather, like many art school students of his generation, Andrews has read some of the

⁴See Jean Baudrillard, ‘Symbolic Exchange and Death’, *Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster, Cambridge 1988.

right things (Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Freud and his recent interpreters on fetishism, Baudrillard on simulacra) and has clumsily grafted this theory onto his photography. This may grant his work some acceptance among a clique of like-minded photographers and critics, but it leaves Andrews shuttling between the trite and the obscure in a fashion which was not true of his earlier work. In 1990 he made the bold if naive statement: '[...] I want to make work which offers "service" to people. I want my work to make people think about the world, about themselves, and the gap between us which is the only real hurdle we face. Making art is my attempt at jumping that hurdle.'⁵ This new, 'mysterious' work is itself a hurdle, a commonplace product of fashion, caught up in a disabling Freudian ambiguity and post-modern relativism which masks the faces of both victims and aggressors. Confessional schoolboy gropings help no one.

⁵Statement by Andrews in *The British Art Show 1990*, South Bank Centre, London 1990, p. 34.