

Discrete Images

Discrete Images at the Frith Street Gallery presents a selection of photographs made by fine artists who use the medium only as a part of their wider activity. In its subject matter, presentation and manner this work is very diverse, ranging from Isa Genzken's X-ray images of her own skull (and earrings) to Gerhard Richter's little snapshots smeared with paint. Nevertheless, it still makes sense to ask, when photography is incorporated into a wider artistic project, whether the results share any common characteristics.

The title of the show is well chosen, for it is striking that most of the images here do their best to be discrete, standing out as autonomous, material objects from the flotsam of representation. As a consequence, many of the prints are 'unique' photographs or are issued in very small editions. Photos are cut into irregular shapes, are marked, buckled or otherwise deformed; Jose Maria Sicilia sinks an indistinct image behind a uniform coating of wax. Rosemarie Trockel's use of heliogravure (a nineteenth-century reproductive process in which light is used to engrave a plate) gives her work the sharply delineated tonal transitions of printed graphics. So many photographs appear which do not look like photographs, and diverse reproductive techniques are used to produce unique objects.

Sigmar Polke exhibits two works which also stress the materiality of the print by the uneven cutting of the paper and its subsequent creasing and staining. In Sao Paulo several packers, pulling or pushing, haul a crate up a modernist ramp in preparation for the Biennale of 1975. The print seems to be a battered record of a long-distant event. The more the material of the print is emphasized, the more tentative is the hold of the image to the surface. It is as though we were seeing one stage in a process of decay, in which the image fades, the mark of the sprocket holes becoming ever more ghostly, until the paper reasserts its original status as matter alone. There is a similar relation in some of Polke's paintings where uncertain, translucent images compete with an aggressively assertive background of printed fabric.

Lest this opposition seem too crude, Polke's subject is a reminder that works of art are also objects, which need crating, shipping, unpacking and handling. This is a demystifying presentation of the art work as physical object,

which also indicates the logical conclusion of the way many of these prints push the photographic image. The packers, who may stand in for the material basis of culture, seem to fade from consciousness as the autonomous object takes charge.

Most of these images are discrete, too, in their refusal to provide any supporting information. We are used to seeing photographs with captions: most of these works lack even titles, again in an attempt to assert their material and aesthetic autonomy. Andreas Slominski shows three diverse pictures together: two of them 'found'. The original is of a broken pallet on a grimy floor, the others show a group of soldiers posed outdoors on ornate chairs and a young boy peering between a man's legs and smiling. Are the soldiers serving in wartime? Is the boy the man's son? Might there be a connection between either and the patch of ground where the palette lies? Similarly in the sequence of images by Trockel, the temptation to construct an interpretation across the series of pictures is strong, though they seemed designed to resist it. Without any contextualising material, these images float free and the viewer is left to construct narratives at will, or make Pynchonesque connections based on a close reading of their details, or, if these games do not appeal, to ponder uselessly on what is unknowable.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres shows a funny little jigsaw puzzle which comments on interpretation: it is a photograph of a fragment of typed text, an intimate letter apparently, arranged so that we can read only a part of each line. Even so, the text sometimes makes a funny sort of sense: 'hopping bag to the required/ ted with rambo intentions'. The act of putting together the jigsaw is a parodical kind of critical activity and the incomplete results are in fact just what we would expect.

Much of this work then reflects on the condition of photography, contingency and interpretation. Down the centre of Polke's *Schlangenhaut* there runs a dull drying mark which on closer examination begins to take on the resemblance of a skeletal figure. While we are used to reading meaning into the contingencies of photographs, particularly that related to transience, in this print, it is the material which takes on the role of symbol and comments on the image. Richter, rather than working on an image to make it fade against its material surface, spreads paint over bright, intact photographs, as though they had met with some accident. In the case of Polke and Richter, founders long ago

of 'Capitalist Realism', although they treat photographs very differently, both show how interpretation becomes harder and representation more ghostly as the object aspires to autonomy.