

Light writing desire and other fantasies

Telling tales catalogue essay by Anne Marsh

Photographers have always been fascinated by the metaphors that accrue to photography. The idea of the latent image, and the *virtual* reality that it manifests, is compelling and appears to mirror the conscious and unconscious workings of the human psyche as the negative image buried in the unconscious mind becomes a positive conscious imprint.

The idea of light writing itself; the concept of the latent image waiting to become 'real', and the way in which the concept of time is altered and interfered with makes photography a magical process, even though it has been heralded as a rational tool.² Many critics have commented on the life/death metaphor within photography, whereby time is both mortified (frozen/embalmed) and made immortal (ever present, although absent). These ideas all impact on psychological processes: memory, perception, illusion and, of course, desire. A desire that writes its memory, captures its moment in time, re-creates its fantasies and phantasms.

Thus the early art photographers made composite photographs of fantasy scenes, amateur photographers on the séance circuit proclaimed that the spirit could write itself onto the photographic plate, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (inventor of the intrepid Sherlock Holmes) was convinced that two little girls in rural England had taken photographs of real fairies at the bottom of their garden.³ Today we can follow the history of UFOs on the internet, find archives of photographic evidence of alien beings, generations of ghosts haunting the pages of the world wide web and we can have our aura photographed at New Age fairs.⁴

These examples are predicated on manipulations of the photograph and its contexts that play with the photographer's, the subject's, and the viewer's desire. Photography can make the ordinary appear perverse, the mundane appear spectacular, the invisible appear real. As such it is a theatrical arena in which the subject can play out his or her desire. The photograph, despite its would-be allegiance to positivism, its promise to represent 'reality', can and does represent a desire that is always becoming: a totemistic presence, a kind of othering.

The performative aspects of photography have often been overlooked or under emphasized in the history and theory of photography. This was particularly evident from the mid-1970s until the end of the 1980s when critics following Michel Foucault (who borrowed something from Susan Sontag) argued that the camera was a panoptic device that had been used to police people and societies.⁵ The argument was refreshing at first because it presented a rigorous critique of the institutional and ideological uses of photography. However, it stressed an unequal relationship between the

operator/photographer and the subject. In Sontag's terms the camera was a weapon and critics following Foucault argued that the eye of the camera was like the eye of God, the overseer, the prison guard. This theory is important for some sorts of photography but it cannot be applied across the photographic field. It tells us very little about art photography that does not duplicate the theory and it is restrictive when applied to amateur and domestic photography. Although it gave rise to art practices that became more self-conscious of power/knowledge relations and how the gaze was ideologically engaged, it tended to ignore other practices, especially those which pushed or blurred the boundaries between voyeurism and narcissism, between reality and fantasy.

Photography's promise to re-present reality upholds the myth of reality but in all cases the photograph is dependent on its context. Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice in Wonderland* and an amateur photographer associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, was one of the first photographers to get into trouble over his child-friends. Carroll, who photographed under his birth name, Charles Dodgson, was aware that his photographs of nude children could be misinterpreted and either returned the negatives to his subjects or destroyed them before he died, very few nude studies remain.⁶ Dodgson/Carroll was caught up in a shifting social context and one that was to change even more dramatically at the turn of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century as the innocence of the child gave way to a recognition of child sexuality, and homosexuality as a 'perversion' started to be named.⁷ Retrospectively, post-Freud, Carroll's work in literature and photography has been psychoanalyzed and re-interpreted as perverse.⁸

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Carroll's work is criticized yet the good mother of Pre-Raphaelite photography, Julia Margaret Cameron, gets off lightly. Her studies of children, which are arguably more erotic than Carroll's, escape the post-Freudian critics because she is a woman and a mother and she cloaks her desire in religious narratives. The Madonna and Child imagery that recurs in Cameron's opus protects it from an erotic interpretation as does her fuzzy, soft-focus technique which gives the photographs a proto-pictorial, impressionistic look.⁹

In the twenty-first century we understand, after more than a hundred years of Freud, that children are sexually active agents. They do express themselves erotically and they aspire to grown-up desires. Fundamentalists from all walks of life would have us believe that repressing representations of childhood sexuality is the best moral policy because adults cannot be trusted. At its extreme such an interpretation legislates against representations of the child in the nude, especially when the medium of representation is photography and/or the image is captured by the camera. This is because we are caught up in the myth of the veracity of the photographed image and we have come to understand that the desire of the adult (usually but not always the camera operator) is more powerful. Thus the child is

represented through the desire of an adult. The possibility for the misappropriation of such a power makes us nervous and we seek to protect the rights of the child.

Telling Tales is an exhibition of photographs of children by adult photographers. Some explore their own childhoods through the family album or theatrical re-stagings (Di Barrett, Mark McDean, Deborah Paauwe, Kate Butler) and some present pictures of their children or children they know well (Polixeni Papapetrou, Anne Ferran, Nicola Loder, Pat Brassington). Tracey Moffat explores memories of childhood experience as remembered by adults, Pat Brassington often uses found imagery, Bill Henson uses adolescents as models for his photo-tableaux and Ronnie van Hout creates his childhood scenes using miniatures.

All of the photographers are conscious of the power/knowledge discourse that surrounds photography and they are aware of the ways in which this impacts on representations of children and childhood, many interact with aspects of the critical discourse in different ways.

The most pervasive image that we have of childhood comes from the family album. Sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu have argued that photography is a democratic picture making medium and that in the hands of the ordinary person (the middle class 'man') it is used as a tool to inscribe pictures of the family as a family unit.¹⁰ In other words Bourdieu believes that people take pictures for the family album that reinforce or write their family into the history of the family as framed by patriarchal discourse. They take pictures at weddings, parties, christenings; they enshrine notions of heterosexuality, monogamy, parenthood. However, Bourdieu is a sociologist and his focus is restrictive. If we consider the ways in which artists have addressed the family album it becomes apparent that all is not well in the stereotypical framework.

Many artists have revisited the family album as a research site in order to highlight the dysfunctional elements of the family. Di Barrett and Mark McDean both interrogate the family as photographic structure. Barrett underlines the sexual tension between siblings and friends of the same sex by focusing on the camp aesthetic of the child's performance for the camera. In this way the recycled pictures destabilise conventional notions of the heterosexual family unit. Mark McDean takes the investigation of the family album further by including embroidered text alongside old black and white photographs. The photographs are small and badly composed, alone they appear ordinary (Bourdieu's middle brow art), but with the hand written extracts they tell another story, one of alienation, as a step-child tries to fit into the family unit. McDean's installation slowly undoes the sociologist's gaze as Bourdieu's ceremonies and occasions of inscription are undone by the monotonous and the ordinary; the small violences and the everyday anxieties which disrupt the ideal narrative of family, hearth and home.

The dark side of childhood and adolescent experience is foregrounded in other works in this exhibition. Pat Brassington and Bill Henson both present haunting photographic series and tableaux that are clearly imaginary constructions. The fragmentation of the human subject and the physical, chemical and optical manipulation of the image and its context produce phantasms and narratives in which the viewer plays a significant part. Both artists convey dark, mysterious and uncanny ideas and dispositions in their work. Henson's monumental installation for the Venice Biennale in 1995 generated critical debate because of the age of the models and their perceived powerlessness. Adolescents, some of whom are reported to be street kids and/or junkies, are seen cavorting in urban wastelands amongst the debris of car wrecks or set against magnificent landscapes¹¹. The naked and semi-naked figures are surrounded in a dark atmosphere which is punctuated with white shards of unexposed photographic paper. The violence of the photographic process is clearly displayed as the photographer underlines the syntax of the photograph. The characters appear to be involved in an unspoken ritual: cathartic and Dionysian initiation or a rite of passage as the artist depicts a transitory state between childhood and the loss of innocence. As with many of Henson's photographs of youth set against nighttime land/city scapes the position of the photographer as voyeur is underlined. He is a kind of stalker who transforms his subjects into angelic, mystical, sometimes fetishist or archetypal images: totems of an otherness that is often strangely, romantically, empowered in the photographs.¹²

Pat Brassington presents the body as an uncanny mystery and is interested in what she calls the 'underbelly' of the human psyche. The influence of surrealism is evident alongside the ghosting and repetitive qualities of photography which stress both its mechanical and alchemical processes. Brassington has created numerous studies of the child using digital manipulation and printing techniques. Many of the images in this exhibition are sensual and some, such as, *Akimbo* (1999), entice the viewer into a narrative of sexual initiation. Here a young female figure is shown from the shoulders down in what appears to be a wedding dress which has been slit at the genital area rendering a small red gash. The girl is holding out the skirt of the dress which appears as if caught in motion, perhaps dancing or twirling. It is at once a celebratory and a violent image, but a soft shrouded violence. Other images present a dreamlike quality with soft focus or collage techniques. However, even images which appear to be un-manipulated seem uncanny. This is particularly true of *Untitled* (2000) which shows a young girl wrapped in a blanket staring out of the photograph's frame. This could easily be an image from the aftermath of a nineteenth century séance where many adolescent girls performed as spiritual mediums.¹³

Anne Ferran appears to be transfixed by the ghosting of desire available through photography and she

uses it to investigate representations of feminine sexuality. She is self-consciously critical of the grand narratives of western representation and although images from *Carnal Knowledge* are reminiscent of some of Julie Margaret Cameron's Pre-Raphaelite children, Ferran's concern is with the mythological and iconographic *representations* of femininity. The representations of children in *Carnal Knowledge* are overlaid with a translucent film of an image of decaying stone, giving them an antique or classical mystery. When the series was first exhibited the pictures of children were accompanied by a photographed caption which also appeared to be etched in stone. The caption told the story of Jupiter and Juno as recounted by Ovid. The mythological narrative centers around a discussion of woman's sexual pleasure and results in Tiresias (who had been both man and woman) being blinded for his audacious adjudication.¹⁴ When asked which sex gained the most pleasure Tiresias answered: the woman. Ferran's photographs of her daughter and her daughter's friends are thus framed by mythology and classical decay. The title of the work draws us into an analysis of the mother's physical and sexual relationship with the child, framing this within a master narrative yet leaving some room for the spontaneous gestures of the child which could be read as a *jouissance* exceeding the symbolic.¹⁵

Ferran underlines and exploits the conundrum of desire found in the photographic process. She is aware of the seduction of the trace, what some critics have called the indexical qualities of photography, where the object before the lens is imprinted on the film, like a footprint in the sand or a death mask.¹⁶ This is most obvious in the photogram process where the object is simply laid onto the light sensitive film. Ferran's images from the Rouse Hill Estate, a historical house museum, use this direct positive process to create the ghost of the past as clothes from previous centuries allude to the bodies of the long departed. Like the early art photographers and the amateur spiritualist photographers of the nineteenth century, Ferran utilises both the scientific and the magical qualities of the photograph. The photogram is clearly an index of the real and yet it is always already a ghost. Ferran is interested in history and gender but she is also seduced by photography, light-writing, and it is here that her stated desire: to make the figures in *Carnal Knowledge* "overtly passive and unresistant", comes undone for the viewer.¹⁷

Much like Henson's adolescents, Ferran's children seem caught in some sort of ecstasy that is simultaneously romanticised and ritualised. These children appear to be framed by an adult desire yet they are also subjects desiring to enact their own subjectivity. In many ways this is what makes them both more and less powerful than their representations.

Carnal Knowledge is as much about maternal desire as Julie Margaret Cameron's *Madonna and Child* opus. Although Ferran's photographs appear less staged than Julie Margaret Cameron's amateur

theatricals, they represent a classical narrative in which femininity is conjured through gesture and touch.¹⁸

Nicola Loder photographs children that she knows well at the after-school centre where she works. The series in *Telling tales* is from a monumental installation of one hundred and seventy five photographs, exhibited on their own wall in five rows of thirty-five prints.¹⁹ The effect of this installation was dramatic. The pictures were all shot with an old medium format camera without a tripod or light meter. As a result there is a considerable degree of guess work and the artist does not alter or enhance the prints in the darkroom. All errors are incorporated. There is a casual and haphazard approach to the picture making process and yet the work takes on the appearance of a monument. All the portraits are taken against the same background and shot from below giving the subjects a heroic stance. The sheer repetition of the images in the installation gives the children as a unit a menacing power.²⁰ Loder appears to embrace the concept of the child-like vision, however, she also incorporates a child-like assessment of the portrait, the subject, the person. There is a deliberate distancing in these photographic profiles one which signals, perhaps, the power of a menacing other, the power of the child.²¹

The images of *Olympia* by Polixeni Papapatriou are challenging because of the realist technique. Like Lewis Carroll/Charles Dodgson, Papapatriou is a 'straight' photographer producing sharp focus pictures with little artifice or painterly quotation. There is nothing abstracted or mysterious about these pictures. What makes them compelling is the way in which the child appears to willingly perform for the camera. Although the stage is obviously set by the adult photographer there is a sense in which the mother as captured the child performing for the symbolic in an absent minded way. The punctum in the photographs is the fetish object belonging to the child. The sucking of the dummy appears to interrupt the child's concentration. To disrupt the photograph. The gaze is trance-like as it gives way to the memory of an intrauterine space conjured by the *objet petit a*.

In Kate Butler's photographs from the series *The Chimerical Daughter* the metaphor of feminine evil and fragmented bestiality is transformed through a post-structuralist understanding of a fragmented subjectivity. The language(s) of the daughter are thus recast and an imaginary, fanciful desire is enacted which simultaneously reinscribes feminine gender roles and casts them as staged theatricals using miniature totems of girlie memories. Deborah Paaue explores similar terrain by investigating memories of her own childhood, however, her children are usually faceless as they perform sensuous rituals such as brushing their hair. These bodily rituals appear secretive in Paaue's treatment and despite the intensity of the color, which gives a light-heated effect, there is the echo of whispered secrets, divulged stories about the body and its corporeality, and with these the spectre of guilt as the adolescent body is forced to comply with adult stereotypes that the symbolic (patriarchal) language

inscribes for woman. Thus the viewer is witness to a secret passage as the child relinquishes her childhood sexuality to take on the mantle of guilt associated with her femininity in adult life.

Tracey Moffat produces a sharp critical edge in her *Scarred for Life* (series 1 and 11) where memories told to the artist by friends and acquaintances are en-acted in the photographs. The *Time-Life* format of photographic essay underlines the temporality and news-worthiness of the images, however, the captioned stage is too theatrical to not be ironic and thus the viewer is drawn into an intellectual analysis. These images challenge the ideal of an innocent and blissful childhood unencumbered by the psychological tensions of family life. The performative staging of the photographs allows the artist to underline the horror and violence of childhood and to deconstruct the myth of the perfect family.

The work of Ronnie van Hout is also performative. Staged sets with figurines are used to create narratives which are sometimes juxtaposed with erotic texts. The child in van Hout's *Mephitis* series is a make believe child acting out a fuzzy fantasy in the world of soap opera. When this series was first shown it was accompanied by a small catalogue which told the story of an obscene phone caller who seduced his target. The juxtaposition between the visual tableaux and the written narrative produced a pornographic tension. Without the story the pictures lose their place in an erotic story, although the grey boyish figure does seem to drift through a rather sinister world in which he has little power.

Photographs of children and childhood will always be haunting, sometimes menacing. Depending on the viewer's disposition an image of childhood may be sinister, erotic or innocent. All options are ideologically loaded. Even the resurrected family album shots used by Di Barrett and Mark McDean become something other than they were when re-contextualized by the artist, the curator and the art gallery.

Anne Marsh, June 2000

Endnotes

1. Discussing the conscious and unconscious processes Sigmund Freud argues: “let us assume that every mental process... exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase and that it is only from there that the process passes over into the conscious phase, just as a photographic picture begins as a negative and only becomes a picture after being formed into a positive. Not every negative, however, necessarily becomes a positive; nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one”. Sigmund Freud, *General Theory of the Neurosis*, (1917), *The Standard Edition*, vol. 16, pp 294-95.
2. For a critical analysis see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992.
3. See Joe Cooper, *the Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, London: Simon & Schuster / Pocket Books, 1997 (first published in 1990).
4. In the early twentieth century Walter Kilner made the first scientific study of the human aura and successfully managed to photograph a coloured spectrum around the body. See Walter J Kilner, *The Human Aura* (1920), New York: University Books, 1965. Cameras used at New Age fairs simply capture energy and radiation from the body which is not visible to the naked eye.
5. The source material includes: Michel Foucault, “Panopticism” in *Discipline and Punish*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979, pp 195-228, “The Eye of Power” in *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972 – 1977*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, pp 146-165, and Susan Sontag, “America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly” in *On Photography*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977, pp 27-48. The most significant secondary critiques include Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, *October*, no 39, 1986, pp 3-64 and John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.
6. Lewis Carroll / Charles Dodgson was involved in debates surrounding the age on consent and “regarded his literacy and photographic practices within a context which included the various movements engaged in agitation for reform”, see Linday Smith, ““Take Back Your Mink”: Lewis Carroll, Child Masquerade and the Age of Consent”, *Art History*, vol 16, no 3, September 1993, pp 369-85.
7. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley,

Middlesex: Penguin, 1981 (first published in French, 1976, in English 1978) and Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu / Delacroix to Mapplethorpe*, New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1992.

8. For a collection of Freudian interpretations see Robert Phillips (ed.), *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as seen through the Critic's Looking-Glasses 1965 – 1971*, New York: The Vanguard Press, 1971, especially "Freudian Interpretations", pp 279-373
9. Carroll, in contrast, has been acclaimed by Helmut Gernsheim for his sharp focus, proto-modernist aesthetic. The "straight" photographic technique tends to underline the veracity of the photograph and it is not coincidental that it is the preferred approach for pornographers. The distinction between the pornographic and the erotic has often been drawn along these lines by art historians. See Helmut Gernsheim, *Lewis Carroll Photographer*, revised edition, New York: Dover Publications, 1969.
10. See Bourdieu, P. *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, Oxford: Polity / Basil Blackwell, 1990 (first published in French, 1965).
11. See Janet Hawley, "Through a Glass Darkly", *Age Good Weekend*, 25 March 2000, p 39.
12. Janet Hawley's article "Through a Glass Darkly", plays with the title of Susan Sontag's essay on Diane Arbus "America Seen Through Photographs, Darkly", where the American critic analyses Arbus as a predator.
13. See Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.
14. See Helen Grace, "The Repetition of Difference", *Photofile*, Spring 1985, pp 5-7, also Geoffrey Batchen, "History Remains: The Photographs of Anne Ferran", *Art on Paper*, January – February, 2000, pp 46-50.
15. The photographed caption which originally accompanied the series *Carnal Knowledge* is not included in this exhibition.
16. For a discussion of the indexical qualities of photography see Rosalind E Krauss, "Notes of the Index: Part 1" (1976), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986, pp 203 and Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977, pp 154-55.

17. Anne Ferran interviewed by Geoffrey Batchen, as quoted in "Anne Ferran: Scenes and Scenarios", *Art from Australia: Eight Contemporary Views* catalogue, AETA, 1990 where the artists says: "It ought to be acknowledged that the work does derive from theoretical concerns, particularly debates from the history of feminism. But I am not interested in trying to depict anything that could be said to be a truth about femininity. I am concerned with the *representation* of notions of femininity as they are arranged in systems such as religious iconography, mythology and classical aesthetics. The idea was *not to claim* any power of resistance for the images but to go the other way, to make them overtly passive and to see what effects that would have".
18. For an analysis of Julia Margaret Cameron see Carol Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography", *October*, no 76, Spring, 1996 and Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995, pp 43-70.
19. First exhibited at Stop 22 Gallery, Melbourne, 1996.
20. See Ted Colless' catalogue essay for *Nicola Loder, Child 1 – 175: A Nostalgia for the Present*, Stop 22 Gallery, Melbourne 1996.
21. Kevin Murray in his catalogue essay, "Three Child Proofs" for *The First Age: An Exhibition of Photographs of Children and Childhood Experience*, West Space, Melbourne, 1995, discusses, among other things, the paradigm of good and evil in relation to childhood. The essay raises important issues, especially concerning the adult's psychological investment in, and framing of, the child: its innocence and its rights. Murray also cites popular representations of childhood otherness and evil in motion pictures such as *Village of the Damned* (1960). Countering the already written, adult, construct of childhood happiness, Murray notes that a six year old child, "one of those photogenic children who bursts in to smiles whenever there is a camera-bearing adult around", was given a disposable camera for her birthday and "produced a folio of children's faces devoid of smiles. Each photo looked like a police mug shot."