

Clare Strand: Vanity Fair

By the mid-1990s, if you were a young photographer in Britain looking for a direction and an identity for your work, the question of what to photograph – simply that – would have seemed a more pressing problem than ever. ‘All the photographs have already been taken’ was a commonly heard phrase of the time, a reference to a sense of exhaustion in the medium: not only, it seemed, had every angle, every style, every possible idea and approach already been used up, but also the act of photographing was increasingly regarded as unavoidably formulaic, seeing was effectively compromised by overbearing visual traditions and inventions, old and new. Our culture had been saturated with photographs for generations; as the artist Joachim Schmid would say, ‘there were too many photographs already, why take more.’ Added to this so much contemporary photography in Britain was still in the grip of a form of didacticism that had evolved from the deconstructive practices of conceptual art, much of it linked to the new body of critical theory developed through the 1970s. Photography in this post-conceptual climate, deemed valueless in itself, a redundant formal language, must now reconstruct its worthiness and relevance by its application either to overt social and political concerns or to the inherent phenomenological problems of the medium. As young aspiring photographers considered what untapped issues they might confront, or pondered how they might best refute some photographic truism, photography as an art form seemed full of road blocks, and aspirations became more bound up with scales of production, success afforded to those who were the most effective managers, mobilising resources – locations, studios, props, actors, and funds – like film directors; something which both reflected the increasing influence of film on contemporary photographers and for many defined where their ambitions were heading.

Within this sense of stasis, however, were signs of a change of spirit. Just as the variety of oppositional voices that had found a common enemy in Margaret Thatcher had begun to dissipate, especially after her resignation in 1990, so the photographic consensus began to shift away from overtly issue-based practices, towards more diverse personal and political concerns, within which there was more room for the experiential, the diaristic, the playfully irreverent and aesthetically bold. The emergence of Wolfgang Tillmans, for example, who had his first show at the

influential Maureen Paley Gallery in London, in 1993, was indicative of this change. Working across fashion, art and documentary, Tillmans' ecstatic installations, were unapologetically intuitive and uninhibited in their celebration of photography's expanded vocabulary. It was a kind of rehabilitation of photography's visual potential and immediacy.



Allied to this, it was the more anarchic, mischievous legacy of conceptualism, rather than its critical austerity, that seemed newly relevant: the work of Americans Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari, Robert Smithson and Ed Ruscha, for example, or the more recent example of artists as diverse as Jeff Wall, Gabriel Orozco and Roman Signer. Also, in British conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 70, the undermining of photography's claim to objective truth did not necessarily preclude a sense of playful anarchy and absurdism. The pioneering work of Keith Arnatt and John Hilliard, for example, which blended various performative strategies with photographic experimentation, analysis and documentation, now offered a distinct point of reference for a younger generation then finding their way through the photographic maze.



In is in this context that we might usefully consider the work of Clare Strand, who graduated from the first year of Brighton University's new photography BA degree course in 1995. As a teenager in the 1980s, Strand was not particularly interested in contemporary art, photographic, conceptual or otherwise, but was drawn instead to the disturbed surfaces of ordinary life as dramatised in popular culture: in crime stories –

real and fictional, in the paranormal, in Hollywood horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Carrie* (1976) and *The Watcher in the Wood* (1980), and in the weird news and strange phenomena of *Fortean Times*.



This interest in the macabre, both for itself and as a social preoccupation and source of fantasy, has remained central to her work, and has helped establish the tone of her own particular form of photographic irreverence. Strand's photography does not adhere easily to any particular genre. Indeed it is her dislike of photography's ordering tendency, its often too rigid categorisations and its still complacent values and traditions, that has underpinned the development of her work. But Strand's art is not severe or hectoring in its criticisms, her approach is never doctrinaire; rather it adopts that playfully subversive quality mentioned above, that freedom to experiment and to reinvent at will the ground rules of what might be seen as serious photographic practice. It is exemplary in this respect of a new liberated and imaginative sensibility in British photography (of which Tillmans' might now be seen as a senior figure), that could be defined as a willingness to embrace photography in all its forms, to travel through and rearrange its history, to be sly or straightforward or both together, or to be absurd for the sake of it. While this work rails against photographic orthodoxy, and authority, it is also a form of celebration of photography's beguiling ability to communicate very directly, to make us think even if not to clarify our understanding.

The work might even embody a form of social or political commentary, a satire perhaps, but in reserving the right to be critical or simply unsettling, it always resists being pinned to some theoretical or analytical display board.

Since 2001, Strand has completed a series of highly distinctive projects, which range over that broad panoply of photography's past and present. Each body of work, from *Gone Astray* to the most recent *Unseen Agents*, takes its inspiration and initial coordinates from a particular photographic genre, from Victorian studio portraiture, or forensic photography, to the camera's adventures with the paranormal. The works gain a certain poise and weight from their historical associations but also an indeterminacy: they are difficult to place and to date, situating themselves at odd angles to photography's grand narrative while gently pulling at the threads that might unravel it.

In the *Gone Astray Portraits*, for example, there is an air of pastiche, as Strand places character types from contemporary London's streets against a painted backdrop of a woodland glade that evokes the studio settings of nineteenth-century portraitists. Each figure bears the traces of disarray or physical harm, but they are also unperturbed and unmoved, standing like wooden actors with a very limited range. The portraits were inspired by Dickens' idea of people 'colluding' in the theatre of the street, but they also suggest something predictable about the assertion of modern identity, that conforming to type is now a pressure we so often fail to resist.

In these portraits, as in the related *Gone Astray Details*, there is a comic tone that recurs throughout Strand's work: the hang-dog stance of the bored youth, the fixed Barbi-pose of the woman blankly oblivious to the ladder in her tights, and that downcast expression of the man with the crutch is more Carry-on character than street victim. In the *Details*, as we contemplate the signs of unseen subterranean forces in the city, there is, again, a consciously ham staginess, the shallow flash-lit revelations of Weegee and Brassai, forced to comply with the more whimsical priorities of an urban nature trail. Here and elsewhere, there is a sense that Strand is always smiling behind the camera, the sober formal or narrative dialogues between image and audience are forever being thrown into confusion.

In *Signs of a Struggle* the perfunctory language of crime scene photography becomes an absurd play about the placid veneer of ordinary life exposed, the banal procedural information of the pictures turned into a kind of suburban farce, which, in the process, again echoes various forms of modernist photography. The diminutive white picket fence in one picture, for example, can be read as the half-hearted English new town version of Paul Strand's *The White Fence, Port Kent* (1916), while the worn path in a



patch of grass, accountably flanked by the numbers 22 and 23, is an hilariously dislodged version of Richard Long's *A Line Made By Walking* (1967).



The aged nature of the *Signs of a Struggle* photographs, with their browning sellotaped edges, alludes to the police files from which they have apparently been lifted (although, part of the perverse logic of the work is that some have been invented by Strand), but it is also an implicit reference to the all embracing archive of modern photography, and within that, to the fetishising of the photographic object. Here the unveiling of a catalogue of minor domestic incidents, emblematic of years of local gossip and intrigue, takes on the sweep of photographic history.

The sense of farce continues in *The Betterment Room*, but is here it is imbued with a kind of melancholic resignation. The work dwells on the abject failure, and again the absurdity, of two systems for the improvement of work and life. One, from Frank and Lillian Gillbraiths' experiments with improving the efficiency of workers through time and motion studies, the other the bizarre collection of aids to domestic comfort and harmony found in the pages of *Healthy Living* catalogues. At the time of this work's making, Strand spent much of her time at home caring for her young child and imagined herself as the prime target for these domestic solutions. But it was their sense of empty promise that attracted her, the inbuilt disappointment that the cheap upbeat advertisements can barely disguise. Wearing clothes and using props from the catalogues, while posing as workers subjected to Gillbraith-like tests, various figures endure the rigours of pointless compliance in photographs of dark formality; indeed photography seems part of the facile 'betterment' to which they are subjected. In their hovering somewhere between utilitarian applied photography, performance, documentation and prankster, Dadaist affiliations, these images bring to mind the 1960s and 70s photo-books of Ed Ruscha, such as *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964).



In a series of accompanying pictures, entitled *Cyclegraphs*, Strand, almost literally, explodes the atmosphere of *The Betterment Room*'s strange and haunting call to order, by attaching mini-lights, called lumi-tracers, to her hands as she performed simple tasks involved in the making of the work: flicking through *Healthy Living* catalogues,

tapping emails into her computer, clicking the shutter of her camera. The results are like a form of automatic writing, chaotic light displays that are the totally useless results of her self-evaluation. And yet the images assert her presence as a kind of magician, the renegade enemy of false empiricism, and they also place photography back in the realm of illusions and tricks, conjuring something of its origins and the magical associations and superstitions that have echoed through its history.

These ideas have been carried forward into Strand's most recent work, such as the project *Unseen Agents*, which again combines two intertwined series, the *Photisms* and the also Ed Ruscha-like *Kirlian Studies*. Again in this work photography seems like the accomplice to a series of mock experiments, set up this time to trace the psychic emanations of adolescent girls. In this some dubious spin-off technology is required in the form of an Aura Camera (available in spiritual shops) and a Kirlian Camera, invented by one, Seymon Kirlian, in 1939 'to detect metaphysical energy of the animate and inanimate'. Here Strand draws us into a side-show world where the past and present overlap and blend together, where the Victorians' interest in spiritualism and Theosophy, meets the Fortean Times and the cult mythologies of 'B' movies and paranormal literature. Photography's authority is deliberately and wittily unhinged by these associations, as is perhaps the po-faced seriousness of much photographic discourse. The work suggests the multiple personality and fallibility of photography extending into the many strange backwaters of our culture and into every corner of our personal lives. The promulgator of useless order and delusions, photography is open to manipulation on every level, not least at the hands of aspiring artists.

And yet, despite the defiance of what might be called photography's vanity, Strand's work is, from project to project, most lusciously rendered. Her photographs have great delicacy and beauty, the simple *Kirlian Study* for the measurement of breath, for example, is an object lesson in balance and restraint, a perfect still-life, but it is as thin air, an empty gesture that catches us in quandary of seduction.



These are the ambiguities and cul-de-sacs in Strand's work, qualities that leave the viewer on a continually slippery surface. Her art is in many ways an intensely private world, her projects are a way of resolving obsessions, of processing thoughts that simmer and won't go away, many of them arising from the most ordinary of encounters and the most routine situations. Like the best photographers, Strand is a great and meticulous observer of details, and yet her work is rarely about that: the details are simply the things that lead her on, to enquire and to investigate, the work itself is then positioned at a point where her, often conflicting, evidence collides.