

Catalogue Essay Project

AM00157-3

Jessica Hastings

HV002816

‘Tell Me A Story
The Constructed Narrative Image: Reality, or Fantasy?’

The theme of this essay is centred on the photographic genre of the constructed narrative image; referring to images, or series of images, in which the practitioner has played a very active role in creating their artistic vision. As opposed to straight or documentary photography, where the world as it is found forms the basis of the image, constructed narrative images are considered and, quite literally, constructed to form a narrative. Through the physicality of setting, model and props to the craftsmanship of lighting, composure and postproduction, every element is combined in order to create the pre-visualisation of the practitioner. These images intend to present to the audience a story, some grand and elaborate, some quieter, more secretive in revealing their tales. This essay will be focusing on the nature of constructed narrative photography particularly exploring the reality or fantasy of the images - both in the context of pictorial content and presentation, as well as a more philosophical consideration of the validity of constructed images’ in the sense of photographic realism – can a constructed image ever be considered real? The points of focus in this essay will be illustrated through the work of Tom Hunter, Gregory Crewdson and Hannah Starkey. The artists selected within the theme have each been chosen for their contributions to the constructed narrative image. The different working methods and personal practices of these practitioners will be investigated - examining poignant pieces of work that present key elements of the genre as well highlighting the different perspectives their work throws on the question of realism and the photograph as evidence.

The first practitioner is British artist Tom Hunter. Hunter’s work is in the large part concerned with social documentary surrounding people’s spaces, particularly, though not exclusively, regarding individuals with temporary or mobile home-bases. He approaches these projects from an involved, personal level; particularly his earlier bodies, based around the lives and situations of his friends where he lived in Hackney. ‘Persons Unknown’ was created when Hunter was himself living as a squatter facing eviction. The body of work was created in an attempt to elevate the status of squatters, over the image that was presented in the media. Hunter says that ‘He just wanted to take a picture showing the dignity of squatter life – a piece of propaganda to save [his] neighbourhood’ [Pulver, 2009] This reflects in his images which present a beautifully, tangible level of intimacy and privacy, a sense of artist

and subject coming together with mutual respect. Hunter says that "[his] subjects are made to feel important" [Hunter, 2009] and this clearly shows.

The element to Tom Hunter's work that qualifies it to be considered within the theme of the constructed narrative image is Hunter's approach to the element of composition. Unlike many of his post-modern contemporaries, Hunter does not shy away from presenting his critical knowledge of art history. Charlotte Cotton responds to Hunter's work saying, 'When historical visual motifs are used in a contemporary photographic subject in this way, they act as a confirmation that contemporary life carries a degree of symbolism and cultural perception parallel with other times in history, and art's position of being a chronicler of contemporary fables is asserted.' [Cotton, 2004, p53] By this I believe Cotton is referring to the changing status of art through history from the position of a post-modern culture; Hunter's work brings art in a traditional sense into collaboration with a post-modern society. Hunter has the ability to retain the traditional aesthetic whilst being socially contemporary, unlike many of his contemporaries whose trend is to employ wry wit, irony and humour. Instead, Person's Unknown, revels in historical allusions - re-enacting compositions from the work of the Dutch Painter Vermeer.

For example Figure 1, Woman Reading a Possession Order borrows not only the composition but the element of the title from the Vermeer painting [Figure 2] Girl Reading A Letter by an Open Window. Every element of Hunter's image has been designed to echo and, as closely as possible, replicate that of Vermeer's painting. From the positioning of the woman holding a letter, in front of a vast window, basked in glorious light to the baby in the foreground of the image, fruit of the loin (in Vermeer's painting the overflowing fruit bowl alludes to abundance and fertility) the composition is echoed.

This body of work poses an interesting question when considering the element of realism and the photograph as evidence; on one side of the fence the aesthetic and composition are based within the creations of a fifteenth century painter; a construction based on a creation. Although the approach and aesthetic is fictional, the message it presents is a stark reality. However the image is dressed up the people within the images are real, their situations are palpably felt - when looking at the woman stood in her bare surroundings, alone with a baby, knowing she is reading a letter informing her that she is essentially homeless an audience can't help but feel a real sympathy, perhaps empathy for a fellow human, woman, mother in a

dire situation. Does the fact that the composition of the image was entirely created (moreover copied) diminish the realities of this photograph in an evidential sense? I believe not, in fact to these images testament, after viewing the work the council decided not to demolish the flats in which the people in 'Persons Unknown' resided. David Bate, in his book 'Photography' defines that 'Reality is what we believe exists whereas 'realism' is the mode of representation that supports that reality.' [Bate, 2009, p41] If based on this, the audience can acknowledge the reality of the situation; therefore the image must display at least a degree of realism.

The second practitioner is Gregory Crewdson. Crewdson's images are renown for their massive scale, not only in print size but also in construction and grandeur. Crewdson's work epitomises the furthest lengths that one can go to in order to create a vision; enormous purpose built sets, Hollywood film size crews and an extensive budget. It is written in an article of Contemporary Photography that 'Crewdson is an accomplished storyteller who can and does bring massive resources to the elaboration of sequences of single, haunting images.' (Pinsent, R. 2008) The word 'storyteller' aptly describes the role Crewdson plays, with his images not only physically created (in the sense of set building, models and props) but also digitally created as Crewdson's images are a complication of four or five different shots to give the greatest clarity in detail. O'Reilly summaries that [Crewdson's images] are so staged – or, better, choreographed, given the number of people involved in their execution – and so doggedly atmospheric that they carry a super-density of import.' (O'Reilly, S. 2005)

The work exhibits 'what Crewdson himself calls 'that blurring between ordinary life and theatricality' (Dykstra, J. 2008) with his images all holding very strong narrative elements. The body of work being referenced is 'Beneath the Roses'. These images are entirely fictional with strong thematic undercurrents of sci-fi, mythology and fairytales, created by Crewdson and his massive team. The series creates a perturbing view of suburban America. The figures in the photographs are stilted, anxious even. They all possess a sense of dislocation, alluding to something that has immediately happened or just happened; enhanced by the transcendental lighting, not light or dark but the shift in between. For example Figure 3, a woman sits on a bed clasping handfuls of petals which trail off into the distant room, you can see her reflection in the mirror behind her, she is wearing what appears to be a bathrobe, the rest of the house is lit but desolate. This image does what Corbett describes when he says 'in the best of Crewdson's scenes, he lets us see what is off to the side, in the corners, and out

of the way... In a Crewdson, the viewer creates what happened the moment before the current scene and what could take place in another moment. (Corbett, W. 2009)

The strong sense of narrative combined with the closeness in Crewdson's working methods with a film production can be noticeably seen in the results; the work can clearly be seen as cinematographic. The images are saturated with information with many layers of detail built into the images. Berg comments on Crewdson's work saying that...'[Crewdson] has condensed filmic narrative logic to a point where a single photograph potentially embodies the narrative expanse of a whole feature film...(Berg, 2006). He goes on to say that the images he creates '... presents the artificiality and contrived aspect of each pictorial context, yet without suppressing its magic potential. (Berg, 2006) For example Figure 4, within the image a woman is kneeling down, she is wearing what appears to be a nightgown and her hair is messy. She is situated in what looks to be her kitchen, however the room has been transformed by the presence of an indoor garden, this image conjures notions of dreams which is enhanced by the lighting, dimmed room with light streaming through partially open shutters.

Concerning the presentation of realism, although all are based in a pseudo suburban US the cinematic aesthetic and production values create an ethereal sense past that of the real. Furthermore, one normally associates films with stories - usually fictional narratives - where all manner of oddities can occur. The reality of these images is practically non-existent however the messages that are presented form a strong enough impression that as an audience we empathise with a sense of real fear.

The third practitioner that is referenced is Hannah Starkey. Her images may appear at first glance to be straight forward scenes of every day moments, however they are in fact highly constructed images using carefully chosen locations and cast models. These images do not aspire to the haughty levels of Gregory Crewdson or reinvent akin to the work of Tom Hunter, instead they play with the mundane. It is only when you look more closely that you appreciate the level of preconception that has gone into the images. Miller comments that within Starkey's images 'Nothing is random, incidental, unplanned, but what results is a kind of masquerade of the real, so real that it is clearly not real.' (Miller, A. 2004) By this it is my belief that the author is referring to the stylised aesthetic created by nature of the constructed

narrative image. For example, Figure 5, a woman is sat at a table with her back to the camera therefore obscuring her face, in what appears to be a take-away or restaurant.

What sets this image apart is the attention to detail for example the colour pallet of the image is a beautiful, cool arrangements of blues and greys. 'The lush colour and painterly effects ...[make] it rich with emotion, reminding us of the potency of living... imbuing them with a sense of possibility, with a sense of longing. Her pictures are bearable because we empathise with this longing.' (Miller, A. 2004). It is interesting to note that the author uses 'empathy' as opposed to sympathy insinuating that the images present a message to the audience that is not only understood but also experienced by the viewer. This insinuates that within the constructed nature of the image emerges a sense of reality tangible enough to allow empathy. There are also stunning elements of composition, for example the way in which the woman's hair falls echoes the form of the fish painted on the wall. Critic Val Williams has written, 'It is as if she has taken the notion of the "real" ... and made it much more precise.' (Miller, A. 2004) For example Figure 6, the image depicts a scene from the inside of a woman's public toilets. The scene is composed in the bathroom mirror; there are two stalls in the foreground. There are two figures in the frame, both depicted in the reflection of the mirror, however we do see the arm and leg of the woman on the far left. The scene is one which could easily be real, however the precise framing of the mirror in relation to the foreground and the two women creates stunning form and atmosphere.

Starkey's work focuses on menial moments of the day, sitting in a café, shopping etc, predominantly centring on women as subjects. Charlotte Cotton comments that 'there is a sense that Starkey's staged photographs elaborate on observations she has made, investing familiar scenes with imaginative potential by restaging and embellishing them as subtle photographic dramas with a fantastical edge.' (Cotton, 2006, p60). These images are not built in fantasy; they display the subtle dramas of to day-to-day life, from average days in the lives of average people, however the precision in composition brings to life a sense of hyper reality. As the Saatchi Gallery describes, 'her work presents a platform where fiction and reality are blurred.'

This work poses an interesting question when considering the notion of reality and the photograph as evidence. The nature of photography means that the photographic image is often regarded as an evidence of events past. For example, Roland Bathes states that "the

Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence — as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents...but its very existence' (Bathes, 1982, p115) he refers to the photograph as capturing what has been. However although these images could easily be recordings of what has been, they are not they are recreations of what has been, then photographed.

One must also continue whether any photograph can present reality, regardless of construction. If one takes the notion of rhetoric within an image then all images are rendered as constructions of symbols and metaphors, etc, the idea of realism presented in a photograph usurped by the need to decode and understand.

It is evident from looking at the work of these artists that the constructed narrative image has the possibilities to go to any realm. Gregory Crewdson's work pushes the boundaries of the medium, the large-scale cinematic aesthetic quite clearly a work of fiction. Tom Hunter's work breaches the gap of reality and fiction, basing his ideas on reality yet presenting it through fantasy. And then the work of Hannah Starkey – constructed from reality, about reality, in reality. Yet as 'real' as these images are they are still constructions. The problem posed here is the intrinsic nature of the constructed narrative image – its construction. Realist photographers regard the power of photography to be in the specificity of the medium, the reason photography is better than any other medium is in its capturing of actuality. Garry Winogrand once said that 'the true business of photography is to capture a bit of reality (whatever that is) on film' (Jay, p142). It can be argued that by pre-empting this moment of capture that the practitioner is indeed changing the nature of photography to an act which more closely resembles painting or sculpture; more of a picture, less of a photograph.

In conclusion, the works of Tom Hunter, Gregory Crewdson and Hannah Starkey all represent the best of the narrative image; each practitioner creates their images with very different personal practices though all contribute to the same collective history. When considering the notion of presenting reality it is evident that this is a subjective choice of the practitioner. Those pictures which are based in reality, for example Tom Hunter's work or those images which depict reality, like Hannah Starkey hold a lot more weight as a document of reality than the overblown, extravagant work of Gregory Crewdson. The answer to the constructed narrative image, reality or fantasy falls on one very important point; the

constructed narrative image will never be able to detach itself from its very constitution. It is for this reason alone that I believe however close a constructed image comes to presenting reality, it never fully can. However, having said that I do not think that for the majority of people a small amount of scepticism over construction diminishes their ability to see the intended reality and feel empathy, as shown by the response to the aforementioned work.

Figure One



Hunter, Tom. 1997. Woman Reading a Possession Order.
Persons Unknown Series. Cibachrome print.

Figure Two



Vermeer. 1657 . Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window

Figure Three



n, 2004. Untitled (Beneath the Roses). Digital chromogenic print

Crewdson

Figure Four



Crewdson, 2004. Untitled (Beneath the Roses). Digital chromogenic print

Figure Five



Hannah Starkey, 2002. Untitled - March 2002. c-type print

Figure Six



Hannah Starkey. 1999. Untitled - March 2000, c-type print

Bibliography

- Bate, David. 2009. Photography: The Key Concepts. Oxford, Berg.
 - Berg, S. 2006. Gregory Crewdson. European Photography v. 27 no. 79/80, p. 24-31
 - Corbett, W. 2008/9, [Book reviews]. Art New England v. 30 no. 1 p. 6-7
 - Cotton, Charlotte. 2004. The Photograph as Contemporary Art. London, Thames and Hudson.
 - Dykstra, J, 2008. Gregory Crewdson's Twilight Zone. Art & Antiques v. 31 no. 10, p. 100-7
 - Hunter, Tom. 2009. Essay 03. Available at:, [<http://www.tomhunter.org/html/info03.htm>]. [Accessed 14/11/10]
 - Jay, B. 1971. Views on Nudes. Focal Press
 - O'Reilly, S. 2005. Gregory Crewdson: Beneath the Roses: Artprojx at Prince Charles Cinema [Exhibit]. Modern Painters p. 107
-

- Pulver, Andrew, 2009. Photographer Tom Hunter's best shot. Guardian.co.uk, [Online] 4 November. Available at:
[<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/nov/04/photography-tom-hunter-best-shot>].
[Accessed 14/11/10]

- Pinsent, R. 2008. Contemporary photography: simple in Europe, complex in the USA. Art Newspaper v. 17 p. 54

- Saatchi Gallery, 2010, A Selection of Hannah Starkey's work. Available at:
[http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/hannah_starkey.htm]. [Accessed 21/11/10]
