

Surface/Substance/Visual Osmosis¹: the photographic work of Will Nolan

*We know that photography is not merely the result of a process or an apparatus but also, always, the product of intention, selection, editing, chance, desire, convention and ideology: a cultural object, in other words, the outcome of human will and interest.*²

Douglas R. Nickel

Photography has and is its own discourse. A discourse that has evolved over time in relation to the nature of the medium itself – the camera as an apparatus, and the technology used in capturing and presenting the photographic image. It is from this information that we as educated consumers of visual culture, are able to glean the historic semiotic connotations and impressionable nuances that have become associated with the medium of photography. This is what in Derridian terms exists as the idiom of photography. As the maker of photographs, the artist of course is always the alchemist of this visual elixir. It is here that the artist consciously or unconsciously (as Nickel's quote above suggests) feeds *through* the technical process and imprints upon it, his or her own individual conceptual intent and artistic desires. For some artists, their photographic practice functions as a meticulous, almost fetishistic examination of photography as a rigorous technological process, knowingly imbued with personal idiosyncrasies as a means of communicating highly succinct questions, concepts and emotions.

Will Nolan's photographic and installation based works tread this very line. Weaving a carefully considered path between the exploration of the vernacular of photography on the one hand, and expressive articulation of facets of individual concerns and ideologies on the other. In his most recent body of work created for the 2014 exhibition *Where to Now*, this particular methodology is especially evident. In discussing three works from the series, this short article offers concise insight not

¹ Osmosis: from the words “endosmose” and “exosmose”, from the Greek words ἐνδον (endon : within), ἔξω (exo : outside), and ὄσμος (osmos : push, impulsion).

² Douglas R. Nickel, “‘Impressed by Nature's Hand’: Photography and Authorship”. In *Photographic Theory: A Historical Anthology*. Edited by Andrew E. Hershberger, (Wiley Blackwell, Sussex: 2014) 400.

only into these works themselves, but more importantly into Nolan's specific approach to his practice as a whole.

From the exhibition/series, the photograph *The Break Through* (2014) is the largest work. In the image, a figure – namely the artist – is seen in profile, seemingly about to step behind a black velvet curtain. With his face partially obscured, the side hollow of his eye becomes a shadowed socket of black against the brightness of his skin. Strangely abstracting the face in order of the eerie and mask-like. In this work, the impression of a moment of liminality is evident. With the inclusion of the curtain, the suggestion of thresholds between the fictitious (the staged) and the real alludes to performativity, or more specifically to the ritual, of the photographic process itself. It is this performance of the artist in relation to the external eye of the camera and the world (paradoxically the artist's own 'eye' also), that is a crucial facet of the work. Here, the performative action is key to the concept, where the photographer becomes enmeshed in the process of production, and production becomes imbedded in the meaning of the work. For the artist as creator, this moment sits at a strange intersection between the precise and the considered on the one hand, and on other, the rawness of expression that comes with the recurring desire to create, to express, communicate, to experiment, to reflect upon, to retry, to fail and try again.

Making for Nolan consequently seems inimitably tied to the task of putting rigorously to the test, his own internal system of logic – which the self-reflexive title *The Break Through* evidently alludes to. Indeed, to enact a state of examination in order to query, seek answers and produce art is itself a transition from one state/stage to the next. But the question remains, for an artist, what exactly constitutes the elusive 'break through' moment? How exactly does the ritual of art contribute to shifts in consciousness, to new modes of thinking, to re-structuring of identity, articulation of the ephemeral and so on? Where does 'I' exist in the arc of the transitory? Can this phenomenon even be articulated succinctly in one single photograph? Or, is the very process of implanting oneself in the question of the 'transient moment' – a subject that lies at the core of photography as a medium itself – that is of most importance here?

Will You Remember Me (2014) is a smaller print from the series/exhibition, depicting what could be a trophy or urn shrouded in a off white material – the only hint of the nature of the object being a small dark plinth just visible at the base of the cloth. Set against a rich inky black background, harsh down light contours the draped material like a bust or a hooded head. Innately, we feel the weight of this work – its strange almost macabre memento-mori nature. The marble-like veil simultaneously entombs/preserves the possible emotion and sentimentality imbued in the object, and gently cocoons it, dampening its message as if muted and forgotten with time. Yet the title *Will You Remember Me* – without a question mark – manipulates the work in order of not a question to be answered but a statement to be understood – a silent scream, an unspoken demand. Locking into the ability of photography to assume two meanings simultaneously – the “empirical” – the visually perceived information (the technique), and the “mythical” – the latent uncanny carefully conjured by the artist.³

A third image from the series *Pretend I Exist*, shows a sharply photographed 6x9 Fujica GW690 Professional (a medium format camera with no light metre – thus no inbuilt ability to gauge the sensitivity of light passing through the lense). Presented in portrait orientation, the larger-than-life camera in its cool black and white tones ‘looks’ blindly back at the viewer/camera, which is in turn permanently ‘photographing’ the documented camera – that itself exists in a constant state of exposure to the gaze/documenting camera. And so on in perpetuity. In a sense, *Pretend I Exist* can be read as an enigmatic human portrait – and herein lays the tension of the work. At this juncture, the metaphoric acquiescence of the documented camera to the audience and the “divine vision”⁴ of the documenting camera’s lens (in other words, the ‘eyes’ of the world) complicates the unambiguous formalism of the photograph. But what is the meaning of this yielding? Is it the perpetual loop of the desire to be noticed, to be acknowledged, to be adored by our fellow human beings? Or is it the complex game of disguise that is played by the artist, who sits behind the photograph-as-artwork, relying on it as mediator for more covert individual anxieties and wishes? Or could it be even more intricately, the paradoxical desire to exist in the impossible space between these two worlds? ‘Exposed’ but not exposed?

³ Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, 1987, “Fetal Images”. In *Photographic Theory: A Historical Anthology*. Edited by Andrew E. Hershberger, (Wiley Blackwell, Sussex: 2014) 317.

⁴ Alexander Sekatskiy, 2001, “The Photographic Argument of Philosophy”. In *Photographic Theory: A Historical Anthology*. Edited by Andrew E. Hershberger, (Wiley Blackwell, Sussex: 2014) 438.

The stark beauty in Nolan's work, the precise and knowing use of technique and carefully considered choice of presentation all contribute to the congruent quality of the works as a whole, and by virtue of this, the series success as a broader narrative. Attentive to the visual literateness of most photographic viewers, Nolan purposefully draws on this knowledge to entice the audience in through the allure of the bold, crisp tactilely seductive quality of his work. As narrative based photography then, it takes time for the viewer to step beyond this, and process the more hidden issues at play. The work in turn does not force a response from its audience, but through carefully poised and presented aesthetics, asks us to be part of the emotive and cognitive journey it proposes.

For artists, perhaps the most profound experience that the art making process offers is the opportunity to work through personal sentiments that are unique to us as individuals – but are inevitably in their essence felt by all human beings. Fear, loss, yearning, pleasure, desire, curiosity, pain, grief, anger, regret – in addition to existential doubts concerning: who/what am I and how do I present myself in the world? There is no hierarchy to these emotions that relentlessly permeating all facets of our life. But there is in fact a great level of complexity that comes with navigating exactly *how* we process them – and thus how disclose ourselves through art (or otherwise). Each of the artworks exhibited in *Where to Now*, not just those discussed, carefully work through the affect of surface information (the photographic medium) in order to trigger a series of conceptual reflections in the audience concerning the emotive philosophical questions proposed by the artist. What is our position in relation to the world around us? How are we regarded? How do we want to be regarded? How do we present ourselves to the world to be regarded? Through highly exacting artistic outcomes, carefully realised through the malleable visual membrane of photography, Nolan's work indeed facilitates greater insight into both the talismanic medium that is photography, and enduring questions pertaining to our collective psyche – ultimately, what it is to be human.