

Screentest (for a hero shot)

Workplace Gallery, Gateshead

June 23 – July 28 2012

On the occasion of this exhibition, Joe Clark had a conversation with curator and writer Michael Birchall. In this interview they discuss thematic approaches that exist in the show as well as the development of Clark's practice.

MB: You have titled the exhibition *Screentest (for a hero shot)*. In my mind this alludes to the film industry, whereby an actor is tested to see if they are suitable to play a role in a film. Do the works on view test your visual language and our ability to interpret them without having an appreciation for the location (or subjects)?

JC: Yes, the testing comes in the form of the iterative and repetitious approach I've taken to the language I'm using. Locations and materials are treated as ciphers as I negotiate with the medium to arrive at something which I characterise in my mind as resting just below the surface. Continually approaching the same position from difference angles allows me to invite the audience to join me in considering what it is I'm grasping for.

MB: In some ways it seems you're testing the audience, through a process of interactivity. There seems to be an underlying feeling of tension in the work, where does this come from?

JC: I think the way that I've approached interactivity is an attempt to de-stabilize and disrupt the field of the photographic image. I find photographic images in all their incarnations frequently entrancing and also somehow suffocating and perhaps wish to break their spell or highlight the promises they make and how they are made. As an example, in the piece I made in Marrakech called *The Blue of the Distance* the viewer cranks the handle of an apparatus which spins a wheel, causing the perception of a stereo image of a mountain in the Atlas and also the feeling of a cooling breeze as the same wheel pushes air over ice and into the face of the viewer. My original photograph is thus augmented with additional sensory information (depth, temperature, breeze) extending the promise of the photograph to transport us to this elsewhere but also clearly failing to do so. I think the tension you mention is this curiosity about the talismanic pull of photographic images paired with a desire to expose their workings and so limit their power.

MB: Earlier on in your practice your images were devoid of all traces of their locality and rendered to a pure, sublime state. In the context of this show it seems a sense of rawness has been left in; is this intentional?

JC: I was 'cleaning' my images because it seemed to me that this was a dominant idiom: Photoshop presents the opportunity to create a flawless wipe-clean surface. This is an invitation which is happily accepted by many people who make images which are put into the world for our general consumption. Rather than working against this largely

commercial succumbing, I felt I wanted to use a similar aesthetic but transpose it to other subject matter and make powerful and seductive images that were at odds with the apparent subject/location. This was effectively an exploration of my own fascination with the way the medium can be controlled and despite our knowledge of this process can have a compelling emotional effect: an invocation of the sublime. In recent works, this formal curiosity has moved more towards the increasing presence of CGI in photographic workflows on the one-hand and the more traditional discipline of studio photography on the other.

MB: The mega structures that appear in your work derive from a variety of "globalized contexts" that could in fact be any industrialized city. Most of the work here was produced during a residency to Brazil and now it is exhibited in a new context. Were you seduced by this location? It was Kant in his theory of the sublime (in 'Critique of Judgement') who first philosophically assessed the figure of the globally roaming tourist in search of aesthetic experiences. According to Kant sublimity lies not in "anything with nature" but in the "capacity we have within us". To some extent this is at the very core of your practice, could you please elaborate on this.

JC: Mega-structures and invocations of the sublime are less explicitly in evidence these days and the locale of Sao Paulo was not as evident as Tokyo was in my work from Japan for example. I suppose there are two ways that my work has now modulated in relation to your question.

Firstly, sublime, the means by which I have attempted to create a sense of the sublime has always been palpably artificial - retouched imagery of cities for example. In this sense it may have seemed that the root of my interest was in a kind of contemporary transposition of a classical sublime: the viewer being placed in relation to a city rather than a mountain. As my work has developed though, it has been photography that has become my focus with the content simply acting as a necessary cipher.

Secondly, this idea of a Kantian globally roaming tourist and the 'capacity we have within us'. I have always tried to make it clear in my works that any sublime effect is derived from within the viewer rather than 'out there'. My recent work in Brazil has continued to play on my attitudes towards an elsewhere in that I seem to have restricted my approach to photographing Brazil to the collecting of photographic fragments and of stock scenes for use later in computer generated compositions. I'm working on images of desert, palm fringed beaches, decaying buildings and generic corporate lobby's. The common factor with all of these scenarios is that they seem to have almost come from a package- they are generic and somehow anticipated by other images out there; as if they have been selected from a drop-down menu or by clicking radio buttons and typing in a search field. My interest is in using them as vitrines for a kind of drawing which uses technology and techniques borrowed from more commercial quarters of photographic practice.

MB: That was an insightful response but I was hoping you would talk a little more on the global context in your practice. In 'Art Power' Boris Groys discusses how cities begin to resemble one another and are beginning to homogenize with the result being when

tourists arrive in a new location they begin to see the same things they encountered in other cities. Your photographs appropriate visual clues from the “exotic” places you visit, in doing so are you seeking to represent the seemingly banal - from a metropolis such as Sao Paolo?

JC: Quite. It feels more appropriate for me to approach a global context through the prism of homogenization. It's not that I feel that there is no 'elsewhere' or frontier, or that a kind of edifying personal exploration isn't possible. Travel is so easy, but there are also so many images of the world that you already feel as if many places are familiar to you. I like to travel and have always found it very productive for my work as it is rooted in the photographic. However I take a certain pleasure in glossing over the exotic and disrupting how we might project desire on to it; perhaps posing a question relating to the real vs. the represented, recasting specific places into mere building blocks in a larger whole, alluding to the creation of desire through the media and the simultaneous deterioration of the possibility of truly fulfilling it.

MB: Several works on view here appear to be a meditation on a specific object or form. I'm curious why you decided to include the *Asset Management* series, where does this title derive from?

JC: The title of the *Asset Management* series relates to the way that photographic images are often described as digital assets within a production workflow (advertising, film etc). In this sense, they are not necessarily an end in themselves. I'm interested in engaging with the photographic image in its current iteration - in the mode that is used to make many of the images that circulate in the culture for general consumption. Briefly, the method that I have used here is to capture a full 360° image of a given scene and then used this as an environment in a 3d package. Placing simulations of mirrored bits of material within this sphere enables me to 'draw' via the distortions caused in the image plane from the perspective of a virtual camera. This is actually something that I have been approaching for a number of years, beginning with a series that I made in a forest whereby I stretched white shock-cord in a lattice between trees and used my camera to flatten these into drawn motifs. The specific form or motif that you mention is something that has been bubbling up for a while and is perhaps most clearly apprehended in my recent polystyrene images - it's a singularity of sorts, an imaginary mountain. The way it appears in *Asset Management* is just a more open and abstract iteration suggested to me by the medium.

MB: This solo exhibition comes at a crucial time in your practice as you recently completed an MFA at the Slade. What are you hoping to achieve with *Screentest (for a hero shot)?*

The Slade was brilliant for my practice. It helped me to enter a very experimental mode, which threw up some questions that I was still working through as I was leaving. In this show, I think I'm setting out my stall in a way that resolves the relationship between the different strands that I've been pursuing. Writing this just before the show is installed I'm

very excited to see it. I feel it's the show I've been gesturing towards for some time.

MB: Finally to wrap up our conversation, why do you have an obsession with petrol stations?

JC: I do seem to don't I. I haven't photographed so many but I think that this is more a function of the lack of petrol stations that satisfy the template of the archetypal petrol station that I have in my head. I returned to a Finland specifically to revisit one with my 5x4 camera to get the shot I wanted and dragged my friend Lizzy on a road trip round West Virginia specifically looking for the 'right' one. I think that its the combination of a singular presence, romantic associations of the frontier of the open road and the formal simplicity of the 'best' ones that gets me going.