The Photographic Object

The Photographers Gallery, London
24 April – 14 June 2009

Reviewed by Leon Marvell

If one were to abuse a famous line from The Communist Manifesto, it might be possible to sum up this exhibition as "all that is airy melts into solidity." Hardly an elegant inversion, but then the work exhibited in The Photographic Object is itself a sort of clunky response to the idea of transforming a 2D surface into a 3D objet d'art.

Weary of the ephemerality of the digital image, the nine international photomedia artists in this exhibition variously stitch, cut, pierce, crumple and splatter the "analog" materials associated with photography in an effort to confound the very notion of a representational surface.

Things don't start off too well however. The information handout made some pretentious claims, amongst them that one would find "a variety of distinct propositions" within the exhibition. Of course there were no such things. As philosophers routinely oppose propositions to the image, any hope that one might have found the promised chimerical hybrid was dashed as soon as one stepped into the gallery. Yet the inevitability of disappointment was somewhat assuaged by the work of at least three of the exhibiting artists.

The work of Walead Beshty was a 21st Century update of the photogram. Beshty exhibited large rolls of photographic paper that had been crumpled and creased in various ways before being passed through the different chemical baths that produce a colour image. These deformations of the rolls of photographic paper captured chance colour fields and densities of pigment that would otherwise have been uniformly distributed over the surface. The images thus produced were what you might expect if Mark Rothko had been let loose in a photo lab. Beshty also exhibited part of his Selected Works #1 2002-2008 consisting of photographs that had been pulped and macerated into 'sculptural forms'. These looked very much like adobe bricks, and were certainly not as beguiling as his large colour field photograms.

Maurizio Anzeri's work consisted of old, discarded photographic portraits upon which Anzeri had intricately stitched coloured thread. The stitching was remarkably complex, reminding one of the dense mathematical patterns produced by the Spirograph geometric drawing toy. Despite their exquisiteness, the images possessed a disturbing, and at times even violent presence. One supposes that this had something to do with the fact that the photographs had been pierced and sutured so painstakingly, so obsessively, with the ancient portrait beneath becoming a ghostly striated mask, that the image transformed into a type of ritual fetish. The work of this artist certainly had an edge when compared to the work of Warhol, also included in this exhibition.

Warhol's Catholic Doll used similar tools: black and white repetitive images stitched together with white thread, but the frisson of the images certainly paled in comparison to the work of Anzeri.

In a display case in the second gallery were examples of an ongoing series by Catherine Yass. Damage consisted of transparencies that were subjected to various forms of torture according to their subject matter. A picture of flaming gas towers is itself burnt by flame. An image of a London waterway had been 'drowned' in a storm-drain for a considerable period. Each of the images resembled objets trouvés, except that none of them had been found, and the processes of distress they underwent were a combination of conscious determination and the chance effects of elemental scourging. It was precisely this combination of artistic decision and aleatory effects that made Yass' pieces so fascinating and rewarding of close attention.

Several of the artists in The Photographic Object were big names: Warhol, Gerhard Richter and Wolfgang Tillmans, for example. It is therefore satisfying that it was not the old garde that made this exhibition noteworthy, but rather the up-and-coming artists showing us the possibilities of the reconfigured and reconstructed photograph.