

Paul Kilsby

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The Seer & The Seen

'An image,' wrote Ezra Pound, 'is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.' Pound's famous definition, coined for the manifesto of the Imagist poets in 1915, refers to verbal images- metaphors, similes, symbols, even whole poems- but his words seem to me to describe perfectly what happens when one looks at certain visual images too. A postcard, a painting, a shop window, a face; these set up chain reactions inside our heads. 'Seeing' is not a simple physical fact. It involves interpretation, emotion and dialogue.

'Taking photographs' is a poor phrase for what Paul Kilsby does. A glance through the images on the following pages will reveal a bizarre and very internal world, full of strange couplings and echoes – where 'real' objects such as fruit, fur, clothing, human hands, are placed next to 'represented' objects – details of paintings, classical sculptures and reliefs, anatomical drawings. By some strange and subtle magic these objects appear to converse: they exchange information, ask questions, make jokes, tell each other their secrets and their pain. The aesthetic effect is vertiginous and thrilling. The images within his photographs reveal each other's forms and structures; they reflect ironically and teasingly on each other's way of picturing the world. The caryatid in 'After Cortona III' is set against an anatomical engraving by Pietro da Cortona, with ears of corn and poppies in between. Time and space are weirdly collapsed. We are invited by this photograph to compare not just two ways of seeing a woman's body, but three ways of picturing fertility and at least five ways of conceiving one of the great themes of western art: the contrast between the timeless and the momentary, the immortal and the living, between a Greek marble statue and the petals of an English flower picked one summer's day in the 1990s.

The ideas and suggestions in the picture don't stop there. There is something almost unbearably fragile and beautiful about Cortona's woman opening up her womb for the anatomist to view. This sets up echoes with the delicate tissue paper slit in 'The Tear', the surprised naked intimacy of Diane de Poitiers, and the surreal half- visionary half anatomical ecstasy of the saint in 'The Visible Woman'. The word 'photograph' just doesn't prepare you for these extraordinary experiences.

How are these images made? The moment of pressing the shutter release on the camera is just one brief stage in a long and meticulous [but surprisingly playful] process.

Paul Kilsby spends hours, days even, arranging these objects and images to his satisfaction, toying with them, 'treating' or interfering with them in various ways [burning, tearing, breaking, retouching] experimenting with light reflections, angles and shadows. In his tiny studio he creates a stage setting for a miniature theatre of the mind, in which every effect is carefully and delicately shaped. Afterwards there is the process of printing, the search for a perfect range of tones, for the ultimate black, for a balance of light and shade. And before he even begins to assemble the objects there is, of course, the crucial stage of mental preparation, when books, ideas, things seen, sensed or imagined, start to ferment in his mind, creating fantastic new forms and encounters.

In a lecture given at The Royal College of Art in London in 1994, he said, "My photographs are very much the act of looking- not the habitual casual glance which fails to take in so much but the slow, sustained gaze like that of a seventeenth century painter of still life; which becomes a kind of meditation." This, it seems to me, is the way in to his world. The ideas are practically endless,

yet they are generated in us as we look at the images. But this really does mean looking, stepping back for a few moments from hectic, data bombarded lives, slowing down our mental metabolism, and creating a stillness inside ourselves that allows the resonances in the picture to be heard.

It is extremely difficult to put into words what is going on in a photograph by Paul Kilsby. There is so much mystery, so many allusions to the artistic, philosophical and material culture of the past, such concentrated symbolism, and at the same time so open and rich an invitation to respond personally to his images. Moreover this whole explosion of meaning detonates continuously at several layers in the viewer's brain like a series of simultaneous firework displays at different points on the horizon- with the result that ordinary discursive language simply cannot keep up. But perhaps it doesn't have to. Understanding these pictures isn't necessarily an intellectual process. Memory, feeling, and imagination- these are, in my view, more important. Like language itself, these pictures contain meanings, codes and messages that are inside us all.

Article by Alex Martin, novelist and critic.

Paul Kilsby has been a full time lecturer in Art and Art History since 1978. He is currently a Tutor in Photography at the Royal College of Art, London and held a solo exhibition of his large platinum palladium photographs from the series 'After Vermeer' at Hoopers Gallery, London, in 2006. His work is held in public and private collections in the UK, France, Czech Republic, Russia, and the US.

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