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Paul Kilsby
After Vermeer

British-born photographer and lecturer Paul Kilsby has been exploring the relationship between painting and photography for nearly 20 years. After studying Fine Art at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the University of Wales, he later completed a PhD in 1995 at the Royal College of Art in London on European avant-garde photography of the 1920s and 30s. The same year, he produced an exhibition and a book of his own photography *The Seer and The Seen*, centred on reworking Renaissance and Flemish Primitive paintings.

Not surprisingly, a conversation with Paul Kilsby is steeped in references to his readings and research of scholars and artists who have involved themselves in similar explorations. Yet perhaps because he has also been a tutor at the Royal College of Art since 1995, Kilsby is also expert at explaining, in simple terms, the sophisticated thoughts and techniques that enter into play in his work. His most recently completed series *After Vermeer* comprises sixteen photographs inspired by the 17th century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. From his home in Sibford Ferris, a village about thirty-five kilometres from Oxford, Kilsby spoke to *Eyemazing* about why and how Vermeer's paintings imposed themselves on his photography.

Barbara Oudiz: Tell us a little about how photography first emerged as both a subject of research and an artistic practice for you...

Paul Kilsby: It began while I was pursuing my PhD at the Royal College of Art. It was rare at the time, though increasingly common now, to be able to combine both practical and written work in a PhD. The RCA was one of the pioneers in that area. It gave me the opportunity to write a lengthy thesis on a subject that fascinated me: the largely overlooked area of experimental surrealist photography, especially the work made in Eastern Europe. Figures such as the Czech artist Jindrich Styrsky, the Polish filmmaker Stefan Themerson and the Belgian Paul Nougé were among many artists producing extraordinarily fine experimental photography in the 1930s and 40s. Yet their names and works were largely absent from English language histories of photography. I was trying to revisit and contextualise their work, to show that many of the strategies employed by post-modern photographers, such as the staged tableau, had been anticipated by the European 40s. My research took

me to places such as Brno and Lodz, cities that, in the years between the two world wars, had been sites of a thriving avant-garde. These artists saw photography as a medium they could explore without inhibitions or strictures.

BO: Yet, your 1995 exhibition and book *The Seer and The Seen* had little to do with this theme...

PK: The key thing to understand is that my research and my own art work parallel each other. My photography is informed by my research but is not in any sense simply an illustration of this research. *The Seer and The Seen* is a series of photographs taken over four or five years, in which I placed objects in front of high quality reproductions—the anatomical engravings of Pietro da Cortona, for example, or paintings by Jan Van Eyck—and then photographed them. You could call this strategy a variation on still life, if you like. I was trying to respond intuitively to the allusions and associations that the paintings evoked in me. In that sense, they were acts of homage. Perhaps because of my academic training, it was quite difficult for me initially to respond to these images in a free and open way.

BO: In your new series *After Vermeer* you also manipulate and deform paintings using high quality reproductions, but to obtain a slightly different result. Why Vermeer, and what were you seeking to investigate here?

PK: I have always been fascinated by Vermeer's paintings; there is something very familiar and specific about their qualities. I gradually realised that his paintings were very similar to looking at the world through a camera with a ground glass screen. I was inspired by his use of a camera obscura, which faintly resembled an old Kodak camera I had as a boy. I was interested in using my camera to investigate Vermeer's paintings in the light of his own choice to mediate the world through the lens of a camera.

As I researched Vermeer's work, it became increasingly clear to me that he had in fact used the camera's eye to see. This is really beyond doubt now among experts. David Hockney published a book a few years ago called *A Secret History* in which he explored the work of various artists who'd used a camera obscura. He made a compelling argument in the case of Vermeer. Philip Steadman, an authority on Vermeer, also confirms his use of a camera obscura. In a conversation I had with Steadman, he said that, in a sense, he considered Vermeer to be the first photographer.

How did you go about your investigations in *After Vermeer*?

PK: I used two different strategies. The first one can be seen in the work entitled *The Cylinder* in which I placed a reproduction of a painting in front of another identical reproduction, so that it feels like a piece of glass has been introduced into the painting. In fact, this rolled-up, cylinder-shaped reproduction produces a *trompe l'oeil*.

The Balance is another illustration of this strategy. I very carefully scored the surface of a reproduction with a scalpel and folded it in such a way that it would catch the light. I hope it feels like a glass prism inserted into this intense, private space. My aim was to emphasize the absolute equilibrium of the balance, which was a very important piece of equipment in Dutch trade. I placed the apex of my prism exactly on the point of the fulcrum of the balance, thereby producing an optical amplification of what's already in the painting.

Or take the photograph *Mirror II*. Here I've created the illusion of a mirror on the wall, acting as a kind of silent witness to a Dutch interior and a private conversation. Of course there is no mirror. What I've done is to place acetate over a reproduction, which then distorts and reflects the image the way a convex mirror would. So this too is a kind of *trompe l'oeil*. Glass, lenses, telescopes and mirrors were of course a crucial part of the 17th century Dutch world.

And the second strategy?

PK: The second strategy can be seen in *The Maidservant*. Here I explored a different quality: differential focus. When Vermeer looked through the lens of his camera, only one plane was in focus at a time. What I've done here is to cut part of the image out of his painting—the breadbasket in the foreground—and place it sharply in focus, while leaving



The Maidservant
Size 24x20 inches, a limited edition of five platinum palladium prints
Signed and dated the artist



The HAT
Size 26x20.5 inches, a limited edition of five platinum palladium prints
Signed and dated by the artist



Curtain
Size 27x21 inches, a limited edition of five platinum palladium prints
Signed and dated by the artist



The Cone
Size 24x21 inches, a limited edition of five platinum palladium prints
Signed and dated by the artist



The Geographer
Size 22x19.5 inches, a limited edition of five platinum palladium prints
Signed and dated by the artist

the rest of the image out of focus. I think this creates an intensely cinematic, hyper-realistic quality. It's important to stress here that my interest in Vermeer's use of the camera obscura isn't only academic; it is also, I hope, a lyrical and personal response to his images. In fact I am very interested in blur, it opens up a kind of cinematic space that is unstable and inaccessible; it keeps part of the image in abeyance.

BO: What other sources of inspiration did you draw on in creating After Vermeer?

PK: I was very inspired by a Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert. In his book *Still Life with a Bridle* he includes an imaginary letter sent by Vermeer to his close friend Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, the foremost lens grinder in Delft. They shared the same birthdate and birthplace. In his letter, Vermeer questions and doubts the materialism of his friend's scientific approach, striving for objectivity. Herbert has Vermeer write: "Our task is not to solve enigmas, but to be aware of them, to bow our heads before them and also to prepare the eyes for never-ending delight and wonder."

Another important source of inspiration was the psychologist Richard Gregory. I'd interviewed him while writing my PhD. He wrote a classic text called *Eye and Brain*. There he gives an account of a character called S.B. who, through an operation, was given sight as an adult. Importantly, he'd never seen before. This case raises very interesting questions about how one learns to see. In fact, it has become clear that we must learn to see. S.B., when given sight, could not at first make any sense of the visible world. The French theorist Paul Virilio once likened human sight to a kind of archaeology, in effect posing the question: Does seeing have a history? If this is the case, then we can talk about an age of "photographic seeing" which for me begins with Vermeer. So you see, in one way or another, my work is often inspired by ideas from the world of theory and science.

BO: In regard to your photographs, does this imply that "the seer" must first be familiar with artistic theory?

PK: I hope that my works are articulate in themselves, without the need to "unpack" them with theory. I wouldn't like to think that they only make sense in the context of theory. My intention is for them to stand on their own as works of art.

BO: Your prints are produced through a sophisticated and complex process known as platinum palladium printing. Can you explain this process to us?

PK: It was invented in the 19th century, in 1873 I believe, by William Willis. I fell in love with the process when I saw Irving Penn's platinum prints at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London ages ago. The process gives unbelievable luminosity and very delicate highlights as well as intense sooty blacks. I had the good fortune to be introduced to Paul Caffell of 31 Studio who has a deserved reputation for pushing the platinum process to new levels of excellence. He prints for David Bailey, Sebastiao Salgado, Simon Starling and Idris Khan. Paul is a real craftsman, as are the rest of his team. The process requires close collaboration between us, involving the production of full-size negatives which are contact printed onto paper hand-coated with potassium and palladium salts. Each image and print is discussed at length, and nearly always printed several times in order to obtain the exact quality I am looking for. I'm dazzled by the richness and glow that results from this process.

BO: Is this process widely practiced today?

PK: Not many photographers use it, mainly because it's extremely expensive and labour intensive, and is also a difficult process. I chose it because it seems to have exactly the quality I need to amplify the "opticality" of Vermeer's paintings. I also wanted black and white images because these are historically associated with the birth of photography. This is the first time I've used this process for an entire series.

BO: Revisiting Vermeer seems to be a popular theme these days. There was the book *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier, which was then made into a film. How do you explain this recent trend?

PK: It's true that there seems to be a new appreciation of Vermeer in the past few years. I wonder whether it is some kind of optical immediacy that explains this. We live in a mediated world largely constructed of photographic imagery. This perhaps explains the immediacy of Vermeer's appeal. But there is also, of course, a tremendous depth to his paintings. I believe Vermeer is one of the few painters who can actually show people thinking. If we look at the people in his paintings, we can almost sense them thinking; his characters are always set in a completely silent world. Perhaps that is a world we crave at times as a kind of refuge—I don't know.

BO: Will you continue working on Vermeer-related themes in the future, or have you moved on to other subjects?

PK: I really want to explore a new area for me which is trompe l'oeil still life, as can be seen in the piece called "After Oudry" I've included here. I mean paintings that were conceived as trompe l'oeil, a kind of optical duplicity. It is, I think, the starting point for my new series. I see my trompe l'oeil images as a kind of conspiracy between a painting and the camera. Again, it's a type of amplification of the artist's original intentions. The original painting here is by the 18th century French painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry. I have inserted the orchid and the reproduction of the curtain in this image, so to a certain extent this series goes back to the techniques used in The Seer and The Seen. I am again inserting real objects over and into the reproductions, though I am now trying to make my interventions more discreet and modest. I inserted the orchid in this image for example, and tried to make it blend in. I also painted the leaf, a three-dimensional object, so it is both itself—a real leaf—and a painting of itself. I also added the number "32" in the top left corner as a kind of cartellino which is a hyper realistic device typical of trompe l'oeil paintings. I'm interested in the way that photography fails to differentiate between a painted and a real three-dimensional object. It's a kind of meditation on illusionism, which I will continue to explore and develop through looking closely at certain 17th and 18th century paintings.

BO: What kind of reactions have you had from other art historians or critics to After Vermeer? Have "purists" from the art world expressed surprise or criticism?

PK: I can only speak of Philip Steadman who's been enthusiastic about my work, but I do know what you mean. It might seem arrogant towards a great master's work to reinterpret it. But really, I feel quite humble about it. I hope to enrich rather than destabilise the appreciation of Vermeer's work.

BO: What would Vermeer himself say, do you think, if he happened to come across an exhibition of After Vermeer?

PK: On one level, I think he would be astonished and delighted to see the esteem in which he is held today. And on another—you know he was actually an inveterate collector himself—I would hope he would be able to see that, in the same way that he collected paintings, he might understand that artists would be inspired by his work. I hope he'd feel intrigued rather than insulted. He sometimes included other people's paintings in the background of his own paintings, after all.

BO: And perhaps understand that you share his way of perceiving the world...?

PK: Well, he bequeathed a way of seeing I recognise. There is something opalescent, a special luminosity, a kind of optical glow he relays through his paintings. I can add one story perhaps regarding my way of seeing Vermeer. It just happens that three or four times in my life, I've had dreams in which I made photographs. In one I took a reproduction and rolled it into a cone and placed it front of another, identical reproduction. When I woke up I made a drawing and then set about testing the technique. This was, of course, how I came to make the The Cone image. To this day I'm still fascinated by the illusion; most people looking at that photograph swear that there is a glass object in the image. I'm intrigued and excited by this optical mixture of truth and deceit...

Text by Barbara Oudiz

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The Cylinder
Size 25x22 inches, a limited edition of five platinum palladium prints
Signed and dated by the artist