

OCA Thames Valley Group Meeting 22nd April 2017

Talk by Photographer David George

15 of us (including two new members Jonathan and Alan) travelled to the Phoenix Art Centre, Bordon to listen to photographer David George talk about photography and collaborative practice.



David has been a photographer for 40 years now and gained an MA at Sir John Cass Metropolitan University in 2009. At that point David joined with two of his fellow students Spencer Rowell and Fiona Yaron-Field to found *Uncertain States* website <http://www.uncertainstates.com>, an artist-led project that publishes a free quarterly broadsheet newspaper; holds monthly talks focussing on contemporary photography and organises/curates an annual exhibition.

Morning Session

David told us that he thinks that photography is going through an exciting time at present being freed-up to do other things now that we all have cameras. Just as the invention of photography expanded painting into other areas of creative art (such as Impressionism) so photography, in an age where we all have cameras, can now focus on other aspects of life, such as our inner worlds. David uses landscape photography as metaphor and is very interested in the qualities of light, particularly at night and in the early morning. He enjoys working with square format, as he 'sees' square and I can understand this point of view because I usually prefer working with landscape as opposed to portrait format yet have noticed recently how often I use square format on my iPhone camera.

In his own work David has taken a contemporary approach to notions such as the 'Uncanny', the Sublime, the Pastoral and Romanticism. He is firmly of the view that, when editing work, one should always start with a title and then exclude any image that doesn't fit that. Work should also be given context otherwise you're taking pictures. He talked us through several of his projects which can be found on his website at <http://www.davidgeorge.eu>

Enclosures, Badlands and Borders (2009) looked at the Sublime and what terrifies us now in a western post-industrial landscape.

Gingerbread House (2010) examined the idea of the Uncanny in the 21st Century by looking at familiar structures such as pumping stations, lodges and portaloos that are rendered somehow unfamiliar when viewed in a different way.

Shadows of Doubt (2011) looming buildings captured in haunting light evoking Alfred Hitchcock's East End childhood. Not recreating scenes or film sets but photographing landscapes that would have been familiar to Hitchcock.

Backwater (2012) was an attempt to discover whether the Pastoral ideal can be found the present-day British countryside, or whether the traditional distinctions between the urban and the rural can no longer be found. David's contextual statement on his website reminds us of the link between the Pastoral, with its contrast between the countryside and the urban, and, subsequently, Romanticism. He asks whether the pastoral ideal only existed for a certain strata of society, i.e. 'the landed gentry', and suggests, "... perhaps if we view the English pastoral with some sense of irony, it may become more relevant to a contemporary society and seem slightly less unjust to a historical one". These night landscapes, created over the summer of 2012, all contain some element of water reflecting that this particular summer was the wettest on record at the time. This series, with its mainly golden-brown tones, does present a still, almost painted effect which is more often lit by the electric lights in the distance though than the moon.

Albedo (2013) is a series where David moved on to reflect upon the differences between romanticism and the New Topographic School with its arm length view of landscape. He finds romanticism in the man altered landscape with the use of infra-red film, whilst also questioning the notion of 'landscape' as being a wild and unaltered space as he explores 120 plus quarries that run over a 20km stretch of the River Wear, no longer in use, with nature drawing them back into the land.

Hackney by Night (2015) is part of a larger series created between November 2014 and July 2015 for the book *Hackney by Night* (2015) which deals with the notion of the "Broken Pastoral" by looking at the cultural response to the impact on the English landscape of industrialisation and technological advances during the past fifty years.

Nine Square Kilometres (2017) is a new series, not currently on his website, that looks at historical Peckham and will be exhibited during Peckham 24 (to be found at <https://www.artrabbit.com/events/elsewhere>) a short photography festival taking place

over a 24 hour (19th/20th May) period during Photo London week . The Exhibition *Elsewhere* has been curated by four artists from *Uncertain States*, including David George.

The morning session ended with a Q&A Session where David elaborated more on his approach to editing and again stressed the importance to him of contextual research, whilst emphasising that he wants people to look at his images first and then read the text at which point they go back and look at the photographs. His overall aim is to get people to think more about the world they inhabit. He is a fan of Instagram which he thinks is a good way to get your work out there and he only uses his iPhone for this.

Afternoon Session

To begin with David talked more about *Uncertain States* and how their quarterly broadsheet came about through an Exhibition. The artists who appear in the broadsheet contribute to printing on an equal basis as it supports and develops lens-based art practices that share the same approach whilst retaining individual choices of subject, visual language and forms of expression.

He then went on to give some advice about Exhibitions – planning, preparation and presentation. The advice was most helpful given that Thames Valley Group are currently planning for their own Exhibition in 2018 although one must bear in mind that many of us are mainly fledgling exhibitors who are likely to start small, whereas *Uncertain States* are now well-practised in putting on large Exhibitions.

We then had just sufficient time for two of TV Group members to present some work and utilise the projector that Richard Down (TV group member and venue liaison) had kindly brought along for the day. Sarah-Jane shared images of her children taken during a stay in Ferentillo, Italy. Her mother has a home there, so Sarah-Jane is collecting photographs of her children there as they grow over the years. This village not only has two great castles but also holds mummified remains in its church of Santo Stefano (see <http://www.italymagazine.com/news/mummies-ferentillo> .) For Sarah-Jane, this phenomenon links with photography and the way it fixes images in time/freezes a moment. We had a beginning discussion around the sequencing of images and her notion of transitional space between them and how does one ‘free’ images to create their own space, introduce randomness.

Johnathan, one of our new members, presented some of his Instagram images which he had used towards an Assignment around a crime scene in his Module “Expressing Your Vision”. David George made an interesting comment along the lines of “... once you put a person in the landscape the whole thing becomes about that person and also commented about the use of hashtags as in Instagram and how add to ways in which an image is read.

Conclusions

Another interesting day which gave an excellent insight into the way a professional photographer approaches photography as a discipline. What came through to this writer was the way in which David George contemplates both the effects and consequences of the rise and decline of manufacturing and industry at a time when the UK has become more of a 'Service' Economy. His approach is more scholarly and considered than political I think, in the sense that he presents us with what he sees by utilising approaches such as night photography, long exposures and infra-red that add the element of stillness/caught in motion to fix the image in front of one's eyes. He exemplifies effective collaboration with other lens-based artists whilst retaining his own approach and vision. *Uncertain States* have a YouTube Channel here <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4O3Ggcr-4t2yH6HeefKDKw> which includes two 2009 interviews with David and there is also an audio interview here from November 2016 <https://www.mixcloud.com/Resonance/there-then-hear-now-4th-november-2016/>

Thanks again to David George for giving us such an interesting day; John Umney for arranging the talk for us; OCASA for providing funding for the day and to Richard Down for providing the projector in addition to organising the venue for us.

References

<http://www.davidgeorge.eu>

<http://www.davidgeorge.eu/Statements/Backwater.html>

<https://www.instagram.com/cbankssurrey/>

<http://www.italymagazine.com/news/mummies-ferentillo>

<https://www.mixcloud.com/Resonance/there-then-hear-now-4th-november-2016/>

<http://www.uncertainstates.com>