

PHOTO-SCULPTURE

PICTURES, OBJECTS AND PARADOX

I remember looking through an issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, when I would have been about twelve. There was a double-page spread showing a football player, naked, reclining on a grass field, holding a football over his cock. I scrutinised the outline of the football, trying to peek behind it. I tilted the magazine at various angles, trying to see the flat image from the side. As a last resort, I turned the page over, in case the back of the printed matter revealed what was on the surface fully obscured. Predictably enough, all were futile attempts at experiencing something two-dimensional as something with depth. Since I was dealing with nothing more than pigments arranged on a plane, the ball was not covering but replacing. For the sake of the image, my football player had been castrated.

Vilém Flusser wrote that when it comes to photographs, “the information sits loosely on the surface.”¹ The photographic surface is taken here to be merely provisional, since the image’s abstracted information can be easily, instantaneously re-applied elsewhere, any number of times. But photography theory has to date over-emphasised the mechanical/chemical reproductive capacities of photography. With excessive focus being given to the duplicable pictorial content of photographic images, their materiality has been considered inconsequential, and invisible. In Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s words, “phenomenologically, the photograph registers as pure image, and it is by virtue of this effect that we commonly ascribe to the photograph the mythic value of transparency.”² This mythical transparency has

meant that we’ve tended to look through or past the surface of photographs, straight to their disembodied depictions.

But as many artists today are demonstrating, photographs also have literal concrete presence and like anything materially manifested they are subject to touch, gravity, damage and entropy. Yuki Kimura, Walead Beshty, Shirana Shahbazi, Eileen Quinlan, Alexandra Leykauf, Becky Beasley, Giuseppe Gabellone, Wolfgang Tillmans and many others are in very different ways working through previously overlooked capacities for formalism in photography. No longer conceived of solely as an externally oriented medium with the job of ‘capturing’ what passes before the camera’s lens, photography has with increasing regularity gone *meta* – referring inwards rather than to something ‘out there’.



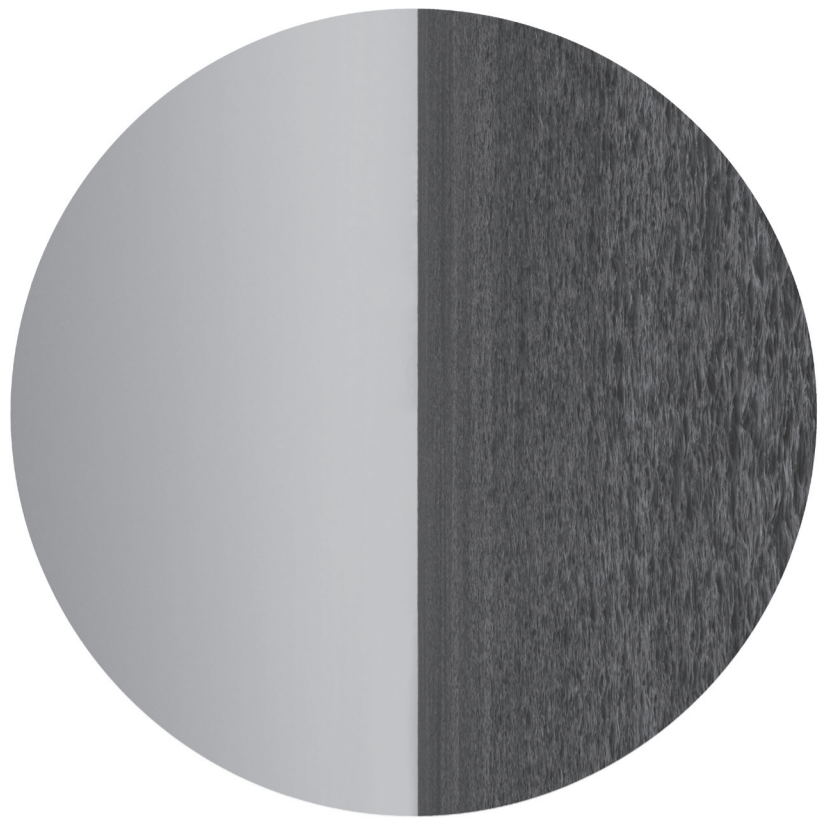
Photo-Sculpture: Pictures, Objects and Paradox (MOP Projects, September 2012) presents recent work by six Sydney artists interrogating the materiality of photographs. It starts with two arrangements by Gemma Messih that play on image/object and surface/support relations. In one, *I’ve only just realised how important you are (to me)*, a print of a found image of a snow-capped rocky mountain straddles a pile of actual rocks on the floor. In the other, *55km/h*, a wooden plank leans against a wall, seemingly propping up a photograph of clouds, their movement arrested by the camera’s lens. This work’s title purports a precise speed,

but it isn’t going anywhere soon. Firmly affixed to the wall, the palpability of the printed image showing the amorphous sky is affirmed by its capacity to hold up the earth-bound rectilinear plank.

Nearby, Criena Court emphasises the ambiguities of pictorial space by playing with reflection and inversion in her work *proposal 7 (film still)*. A still from an unnamed film is abstracted and materialised elsewhere in a halftone dot pattern, and then propped up above a reflective surface, onto (into?) which it casts its appearance. The image is thereby flipped from upside down to right side up – an operation that is already involved in all optical perception. The picture in the mirror is the unsubstantial counterpart to the physical print above it, but it appears closer than it to reality. Between the two surfaces there is also the intruding presence of a solid rock, which casts its own image into the intangible optical space of the mirror. This disrupts any *trompe l’oeil* potential of the work, affirming its immediate tangibility as an object in the world.



The photographic image takes temporarily and temporally embodied form in Michaela Gleave’s work *Orbit*, where projected light casts a rotating circular image of a generic oceanic horizon. Horizons are, as we know, not actually horizontal – they’re fragments of the orbiting planet’s spherical surface, and are therefore lines without any beginning or end. This projected image might



lack the weight and tangibility of the other works in the exhibition that experiment with printed or otherwise concretely manifested photographic pictures. But there is nothing disembodied about it – the projector’s obvious presence is an integral part of the experience of the work, and the image arrives on the wall only via an analogue glass slide. Michaela has turned to photography’s most basic media – time, light and surface – to create something absolutely spatial that straddles divisions of movement, stillness, process and object – kind of like light itself, which is still infuriating physicists by behaving both wave-like and particle-like, depending on how we look at it.

As part of her ongoing inquiry into photography and form, Marian Tubbs has for this exhibition worked between various surfaces – skin, silk, glass and a TV screen. Playfully referencing Duchamp’s magnum opus *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, she has stripped herself bare, with a semi-nude self-portrait transferred onto silk and draped over two panes of glass. In another precarious arrangement, a large glass (get it?) water bottle is suspended above a monitor displayed on its side atop a gallery plinth, showing a video with Marian pointlessly grappling with the physicality of the same bottle’s

confusing enormity. She is barely coping. Half-laughing and half-crying, she tries to hold it above her head as water trickles out of it, on loop.



Finally, Sarah Mosca and Kim Fasher (working collaboratively here as SuperKaleidoscope) have set up an intricate play of pairings, splittings, doubles and doublings. An unpitched tent, an original signed and slightly intervened copy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a nineteenth-century Swedish coin re-cast with ‘heads’ on both sides, an image with an incorrect caption, beeswax cast in old photographic-paper boxes, a photo of the sun looking more like the moon, and a reproduction of Rodin’s *Icarus*, post crash. All pieces have been gleaned in response to the Swedish balloonist



S. A. Andrée's ill-fated attempt to cross the North Pole with two companions in a hydrogen balloon in 1897 – they crashed after two days and their fates remained unknown until their bodies were found in 1930, along with mostly intact negatives of photographs that had been taken in the days that followed the fall, as the explorers trekked across the surface of the drifting icescape.

There is perhaps some irony in the fact that it's only after the "dematerialisation of the art object" (whatever that was) and digitisation's so-called "dematerialised" images, that the enduring materiality of photographic images is being affirmed in this way. Getting beyond the medium's "burden of depiction," as Jeff Wall has termed it,³ all the works shown in *Photo-Sculpture* embrace the instabilities of the photographic image, and face head-on its internal paradoxes regarding content and form, creation and representation, abstraction and concretion.

Amelia Groom

1 *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000)
 2 *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)
 3 "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965–1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (MIT Press, 1995)

**Artists in conversation with writer
 Amelia Groom 6pm September 22**

IMAGE CAPTIONS
 (in order of text)

Gemma Messih
I've only just realised how important you are (to me) (detail)
 2012
 C-type print, blue metal rail ballast
 Dimensions variable

Criena Court
proposal 7 (film still)
 2012
 plywood, plexiglass, print, andercite
 110cm x 110cm x 110cm

Michaela Gleave
Orbit
 2012
 Glass gobo, rotator, zoom spot
 Dimensions variable
*Image courtesy the artist and Anna Pappas Gallery, Melbourne
 This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.*

Marian Tubbs
TBSBbHB,E (TLG)(After M. Duchamp and F. Woodman) (detail)
 2012
 digital print on silk,
 100cm x 52.2cm

SuperKaleidoscope
(Kim Fasher and Sarah Mosca)
 Photograph by Nils Strindberg.
 Image courtesy of the Grenna Museum - Polarcenter / The Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography
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ARTSPACE

COVER
Gemma Messih
55km/h (detail)
 2012
 C-type print, timber
 Dimensions variable

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 PICTURES, OBJECTS
 AND PAPERBOX