

Some things, somewhere

Nicky Walsh

Fergus Heron



Of the many uses to which the photograph has historically been put, two of its principal tasks have been to confer the status of the thing upon an object and to make knowable the built spaces we inhabit. A process that at its most basic, invites a viewer to look and consider as important something in the world and the imagination as a pictured trace or index, has in part defined the work of the photograph since the convergence of philosophical, optical and mechanical processes that brought it into being around the middle of the nineteenth century.

So fundamental are these tasks that we often pay little attention to the types of pictures that have and continue to carry them out, together with the genres through which we make meaning of them, namely the still - life and the interior. In some early forms of photography, collections of objects arranged before the camera as still - life sought among other things to prove their existence and that of photography itself. Yet like still - life painting before, they also served to remind us of our mortality, the futility of our ambition for material wealth. These pictures often consisted of objects arranged against a void, or nothingness, a space that shows how our desire for any object will always be greater than the capacity of anything to fulfil it. The interior is a different kind of picture. It makes a relationship between the lived experience of architecture and its pictorial representation, often more modest and intimate than the conventional architectural or landscape picture, its subject more abstract and spatial, less knowable than the physical objects organised and pictured as still - life. The interior poses questions concerning the location, meaning and significance of the space it represents. It is a commonly experienced picture, not quite achieving the status of a known genre like the still - life. The interior photograph at perhaps its most fundamental, proposes a space between notions of the general and of the specific, the private and the public. It often shows a kind of threshold, a point where collective and personal experience might meet.

Very broadly put, photography emerged co-extensively in the mid nineteenth century with modern forms of institutionalised labour. In the mid twentieth century it became utilised by a modern capitalist economy that it continues to serve with great effect, primarily through advertising. As types of photographic

images that serve the demands of modern economies, both the interior and the still – life have become ubiquitous in twenty first century modern culture. We absorb such images almost without noticing. Pictorial genres that are considered art historically as ‘low’ like the still – life, and, perhaps the interior, possess a great ability to make desirable those things often valued most highly, in terms of exchange value at least. Built property and commodities often largely constitute the range of things referred to in such photographs.

Photographs from the series entitled ‘In Search of Boredom’ by Nicky Walsh make use the genres of the still - life and of the interior. Yet they also complicate and gently subvert these genres, altering their significance and releasing meanings both of and other than those conventionally ascribed to them. They picture everyday objects, themselves unremarkable, in ways more commonly used to show desirable commodities. These objects are placed in spaces encountered in the built property of the corporate interior, spaces that also make subtle reference to the both the photographic studio, a space of production, and also to the spaces of commodity display in the modern retail environment, spaces of consumption. They quote, without actually being, generic pictures of generic things in generic spaces. These are highly accomplished photographs, rich in reference to both the history of art and to commercial culture. Referring to older pictorial genres, these are paradoxically modern pictures of modern spaces and modern things, at once both highly constructed, executed with exquisite formal consideration, yet knowingly playful. There is no narrative in these pictures, showing neither an event nor an easily knowable set of conditions or state of affairs, the bleached whites and translucent grey – greens of the melamine surfaces in them, the low lustre of their metallic objects, the delicate transparency of polythene, all limit our ability to read the space, to know where the things they show might be. Each interior might be almost anywhere and at the same time nowhere.

The selection of objects within the pictures is made from the paraphernalia of the modern work place, objects that make some forms of modern bureaucratic work possible; staples, post-it notes and biro pens, bulldog clips and plastic cups.

Despite the elevation of these objects to the status of things through the process of photography, we cannot be certain of them as things. These objects might be encountered as they are, ready - made compositions or otherwise, organisations of objects carried out only for the camera. They are shown in photographs suffused with light, that which photography conventionally confers both visibility and knowledge upon its subject. An absence of shadow implies there is and can be no time in these pictures. Their obstinate stillness, flatness of illumination and limited palette of colour unsettle our sense of time and place. We cannot know when these things were.

Nicky Walsh at first shows us some spaces and things of modern work in her 'In Search of Boredom' photographs. Yet in doing so, she invites us to consider such things as both ordinary and extraordinary, in spaces at once familiar and strange, unremarkably mundane and seductively luxurious. These are playful pictures that nonetheless pay close and serious attention to both immediate realities and day - dream like reveries, conditions of our being that are often not so differently experienced from one another.

Fergus Heron