



Alzheimer's  
*a quiet story*

Arabella Plouviez





lost

In development for some three years, Arabella Plouviez's new series of photographs was originally anticipated in a rather different form. Rather than the beautifully orchestrated sequence of images and text we encounter here in a presentation that benefits from the intimate formality of the gallery space and accompanying publication, a single image from the series was first exhibited as part of a recent festival of billboard art in Sunderland, UK, in 2012. As a large-scale public realm installation in a site usually associated with media advertising, chancing upon the work here was a quite different experience<sup>4</sup>. In a way typical of Arabella's practice, the billboard installation brought together text and image in suggestive combination. Quite unlike the contemplative gallery setting, it was exhibited along the side of a busy city-centre road where the artwork had to compete for attention with other advertising spaces and where rush-hour traffic regularly thwarted the attempts of pedestrians – the accidental viewers of the work - to cross over and come closer. Such differences in viewing contexts generate a number of different readings for the work.

The particularity of the simple word 'forgotten' on the billboard, for instance, became paradoxically memorable on this scale, especially when juxtaposed with a fragmentary yet imposing still-life from a domestic setting: a familiarly unfamiliar interior that appeared here on the city street. Where, in the billboard realm, we might expect to see 'the very best of contemporary living,'<sup>5</sup> instead we encountered something both more ordinary and yet more idiosyncratic: an interior image that defied our consumerist expectations of ideal home-making; an aging room set, one where the slightly-faded wallpaper references the tastes of an older generation perhaps and the objects on the sideboard are arranged but not coordinated, well-loved items rather than inviting new products or investments. The etymology of the word 'forgotten' is apt in this context, implying as it does a losing of one's grip, an 'un-getting' from the mind,<sup>6</sup> perhaps a denial of the advertisers' image worlds. Ironically (and serendipitously), the text of 'forgotten' was also in visual and conceptual juxtaposition with the brand name of the media giant Primesight, whose logo underscores every billboard it owns in the UK.

What we can never ascertain from the billboard presentation of a single image, of course, is the personal, even subjective, implications of the work, nor its place within a larger creative enquiry. It is precisely these elements that come to the fore in the completed series, where the same image-text work 'forgotten' becomes just one couplet in a larger visual- text ensemble.

The creative combination of image and text used here is typical of Arabella's photographic strategies. In previous series, for instance, she has utilized such combinations to unravel stereotypical representations of women, as in her recent *Naristan* series (2008) in which portraits of educated Bangladeshi women in various domestic environments are juxtaposed with quotations from an early twentieth novel by Rokeya Shakawat Hossain, a well known Bengali writer and feminist activist. Where *Naristan* appropriates the creative voice of a historical woman novelist and references her witty utopia of *Naristan* (or *Ladyland*), where women are free in the public realm and men are kept secluded away, in the earlier *Deviant Women* series (2007) the textual references were those of nineteenth century scientific taxonomies. In this series, the historical language of criminology and psychiatric theory is set against contemplative portraits of women again caught in reverie in domestic interiors. 'Acute Mania,' 'Chronic Melancholia,' 'Erotic Mania': such defining categories of female deviance are juxtaposed with quietly eloquent portraits of women of many ages, the collision between what we see and what we read once more unsettling our perceptions and preconceptions.

Both *Naristan* and *Deviant Women* knowingly rework the conventions of photographic portraiture: the women in both series are insistently present and yet distant. Anonymous, their identities slip behind the accompanying text that displaces more than it anchors them. In the new work presented here, on the other hand, individuality is still further removed in a series of photographs of empty interiors, of room sets and beautifully observed, inanimate objects. Everything here is worn or aged, bearing the marks and scars of former use. Each image is singular, yet each is clearly related, somehow, to all the others. The text work accompanying the images is equally particular: 'absent', 'confuse', 'lost', 'hidden', 'routine', 'considered' and, once more 'forgotten': coming together as Alzheimer's: a quiet story.

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1 <http://www.photography-at-sunderland.co.uk/ArabellaPlouviezweb/Billboards/Forgotteninsitu.html> (accessed 13.11.13)

2 <https://www.facebook.com/idealhomemagazine.co.uk/info> (accessed 13.11.13) The quote continues: 'Ideal Home is Britain's best-selling interiors magazine and we've been inspiring Brits to create their own ideal homes for over 90 years. Our mission is to bring you the very best of contemporary living, from the latest decorating looks to the best new home-improvement ideas, plus our pick of gorgeous new products from high-street stores and individual companies'.

3 <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php> (accessed 13.11.13)

The series title is at once simple and challenging, combining as it does highly-charged medical terminology (Alzheimer's) and something altogether more unassuming and personal: a quiet photographic story. Such modesty however belies the subtlety and emotional resonances of the work. Like other medical conditions (cancer, HIV, meningitis, for instance), the very term Alzheimer's is shocking. First described by the German neurologist Alois Alzheimer in 1906, Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia affecting almost half a million people in the UK alone, most of them over the age of sixty-five.<sup>4</sup> As many have pointed out, however, such bare statistics do little to mask the personal sadnesses, the traumas and fears that surround any such diagnoses and its impact on sufferers, families and carers alike.<sup>5</sup> In many respects, Alzheimer's is also a largely invisible and unheard disease, its sufferers most often the elderly, themselves under-represented in the regimes of contemporary visual media. And as a disease of the brain, the progressive ravages of Alzheimer's are also invisible: its symptoms of memory loss, mood changes and problems of reasoning and communication are often un-inscribed on an otherwise healthy body.

In referencing such a disease, the title of Arabella's series inevitably draws emotional attention to itself. Yet in their reticent anonymity, the images in the series also point to the sheer ordinariness of the condition and its potential affects on everyone and anyone. It is indeed the experiential aspects of the disease that are referenced here, not the science or the facts. As such, the work speaks eloquently of lived absences, of somebodies, some experiences or some things that are just beyond the regimes of visibility and representation.

In fact the images here are all personally significant and the interiors referenced are those of the photographers' childhood and family home. Once teeming with the cacophonies of busy family life, the home is visually silenced here. The room sets are all empty; no one is reflected in the mirrors, no backs are caught turning the corners or on the way upstairs. Yet someone once recently sat on the sofa and its indented cushions bear silent witness. Someone slept in the bed, though we never quite know whom. Drawers are half opened and the cupboard left ajar, so we can never be sure if there is a task to be completed or not. More than testimony to the unstoppable flow of time, these redolent interiors are also in part photographic metaphors for the struggle to remember what once was and also what is now: they are metaphors for the very experience of Alzheimer's itself perhaps.

While the empty room sets are paradoxically filled with quiet traces of existence, the object arrangements have some of the visual and conceptual qualities of the traditional still life. Stilled life might be the more accurate term. Drinking glasses arranged in the cabinet are formally precise, the collection dear to someone: considered, as the text-work implies, yet also undusted, just like the neatly stacked cups, saucers and plates in the half-open cupboard. Such careful ordering of objects on sideboards, bookshelves and tables attests indeed to the many routines of domestic life and to the personal desires that underpin them, whilst alluding also to the heightened importance of repetition, order and familiarity in the experiences of those living with Alzheimer's. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the disease is that sufferers often have finely tuned memories of childhood and early adulthood; individuals are locked into their histories, yet the directly experienced world is continually interrupted, made strange and distressing by the failures of short term memory. Such disjuncture is exacerbated for many by anything and everything extra-ordinary. The enlarged detail of the balding carpet in one photograph here, like the worn tread on the steps, implies again something of the individual sufferer's imperative for sameness, for the preservation of things as they are.

An aging suitcase with a hand-written label is a mysterious presence in another of the photographs. We might wonder what it is that is 'preserved', whose writing it is, what journeys it has seen, what stories it could tell, what secrets it keeps. But, rather like the not-quite-decipherable writing on the suitcase label pictured, our access to such historical memory is partial and imaginary. It is fitting, in fact, that photography is the artist's chosen medium for exploring such limitations of memory, such eclipsed stories. Despite its insistent reputation as a guardian of personal remembrance and repository of shared social experience, photography alone has never lived up to such a challenge. Indeed, the significance of any personal photograph or album has always been dependent on words, spoken or written, as well as the practices through which the photograph is made, shared and talked about. Alzheimer's: a quiet story reminds us of this continual enmeshing of photography in the web of words and meanings. Yet the words that appear here are less prompts to (better) remembrance so much as ciphers of our drive not to forget completely.

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4 [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk) (accessed 19.11.13)

5 <http://www.alzheimersreadingroom.com> (accessed 20.11.13)





confuse



forgotten