

no more than the peripheral ground upon which the painting operates. For all the intimations of human activity within this scene, ultimately it is a scene of desertion, a suspended narrative from which humanity is excluded.

In presenting us with the fait accompli of these matter-of-fact, understated scenes, Maclean uses them to ask a whole string of questions. The stark, clinical, and sometimes bleak scenes we contemplate here variously ask, why do we furnish and decorate our rooms in this way, where is our model, our inspiration? Why do many of them seem so formal? Not only are they clean but verging on the sterile. Where are the possessions of the possessors to relieve these rooms of their anonymity? Has Maclean, like Fiona Crisp in her pinhole camera images of caravan interiors, emptied them of possessions, or has the tidiness of their possessors become an obsessive neurosis? This raises another consideration of course, have these rooms as a consequence become prisons, burdens which plague their possessors, rather than the sanctuaries that, traditionally, they might retire to as an escape from the ravages of a demanding world?

In his essay, *See Naples and Die*<sup>3</sup>, Howard Caygill writes 'The sense of the passing moment saturates even the most banal

photograph and invites the melancholy discourse on photography as a work of mourning'. The possibility of the morbidity of these scenes, presented by Maclean, has to be mentioned, those depressions in the seat cushions on that sofa, that plumped-up scatter cushion, the clinically hung picture on the wall. Are these all mute memorials of the actions of someone who is no longer? Does the undercurrent of melancholia inherent in the photographic image become an overwhelming torrent here? Is there a future here, or merely a past? Are there the indications of possibility, or merely the triggers of reminiscence? The idea of the photograph as an index of death, seems to make more sense the longer we look at some of these images. As death can be experienced but not described, its processes outwitting language, then these mute images become apt signifiers of the symptoms of death. Just as death is a threshold between certainty and uncertainty, then when we look at Mary Maclean's photographs, the certainty of what we are seeing is gradually eroded by the uncertainty of the meaning of what we are seeing. The threshold here is the distance, both in space and time, between our gaze and that finite event of the photograph's execution.

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## Mary Maclean's tableaux of empty moments

With the current ubiquity of soap opera on television – soaps, docu-soaps and soap comedies or sit-coms – and of course, reality TV, we are not just given an insight into contemporary lives as they are lived, but are virtually assaulted by those emotive hubs of modern domesticity, their overloaded dramas coming at you in a breathless, relentless stream. Dialectic, didactic and diagnostic for good measure, it would seem that the picture of this particular scenario is fairly complete, that there is not much more to be said. The hyperbole, however, is exhausting. Surely there must be a quieter, more prosaic picture somewhere? Surely there is somewhere where we can enter into a dialogue with the phenomena of contemporary domesticity, where empathy as well as sympathy can come into play?

Mary Maclean's take on domesticity certainly engages with the prosaic and the banal that reside on the unsung peripheries of domestic living, but it also does much more, it inflates the liminal and the subliminal of the fringes, whose unremarkable details escape our notice during the day to day negotiations with such spaces. Her minimal, stripped down depictions of domestic interiors are demure

and understated in the extreme, deigning to betray as little as possible of the general context of their sites of absence. These large-scale silver gelatin prints present us with mere glimpses of scenes, which offer themselves as peremptory signatures relaying the ghosts of identity of these places. Absence figures large here, the vacuum that it invokes implores us to fill these spaces with imaginary events and their perpetrators. We are all detectives at heart, and our analytical curiosity is allowed full rein; we can be as intrusive as we like in the thoughts and imaginings that we weave around the anonymous fragments of domesticity that Maclean presents to us here.

In an apparent tryst with the zeitgeist – with its obsessive fascination for ordinary lives, their environments, configurations and entanglements – Maclean offers us abbreviated cameos of humdrum interiors whose qualities could be described as no more than ordinary. These details, however, often anachronistic, hold back more than they reveal. In their neutrality, they remind us of that questionable archetype of the provincial elderly, whose remnants of sheltered lives offer no room for the whimsy of fashion, which is but mere abstraction, a remote irrelevance. Certain types of furniture, for instance the standard lamps that recur in several

<sup>1</sup>Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Places*. Penguin Books, 1997. Page 24.

<sup>2</sup>Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1994. Page 47.

<sup>3</sup>Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (Editors), *de-, dis-, ex-*. Volume Two: *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity*. Black Dog Publishing, 1998. Page 143.

Image overleaf, 'Park House 1', 2002, silver gelatin on aluminium, (detail)

'2.15pm', 2002, silver gelatin on aluminium



'Arthur's Seat from the Braid Hills', 2000, silver gelatin on aluminium



of these images, stand as environmental indicators, in that they are beacons for an identifiable kind of domesticity. The furniture, the décor and the objects that inhabit these images, however, as surrogates for their users, somehow transcend that utilitarian mode to which they are customarily consigned – in isolation they become objects in themselves, mundane sculptures, breeding their own autonomous narratives – we come to appreciate here Kant's Ding an sich (thing in itself). At the same time, the thingness of these inanimate subjects has an uncertainty about it which of course is germane, given that we are immersed in the 'age of uncertainty' predicated on a culture of pluralism. This tryst with the zeitgeist, however, is a fickle one as these photographs actually heighten that sense of uncertainty that we seek to alleviate through our immersion in the soap opera and its kindred.

A passage from George Perec's book *Species of Spaces and Other Places*<sup>1</sup> seems cogent in relationship to Maclean's work. In this passage Perec asks, 'What does it mean to live in a room? Is to live in a room to take possession of it? What does taking possession of a place mean?' My answers in response to Perec's questions are, that we live in a room through the agency of things that we

'possessed' earlier, and these things in turn signal our 'possession' of that room. We build up a personal landscape of accumulated possessions to signal our possession of that room. I will now add the question, is Mary Maclean mapping parts of those personal landscapes here, testing and assessing the durability and authority of those possessions which stand in proxy for their absent possessors? The uncertainty factor, mentioned above, seems to indicate that this relationship is, in fact, very fragile. As if to counter this, however, Gaston Bachelard, in his book *The Poetics of Space*<sup>2</sup>, states, 'A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space'. Are we to understand then that there is a sort of intangible 'presence' or active 'spirit' of possession abroad in a room once we have claimed it as our own, and if so, are we able to detect a sense of its 're-inforcement', shoring up the fragility of possession, in Maclean's images of these rooms?

Some of the rooms in these images are not domestic, however, they depict those anonymous contrivedly 'homely' spaces of guest houses or bed and breakfast accommodation, which can never really accrue any sense of identity, but instead seem to refer to a stereotypical domestic ideal. This generic 'chintzy' aesthetic,

which seems to betray misguided aspirations towards an appealing 'aesthetic', in fact does no more than refer to its own shortcomings. If we can readily detect the difference between such a space and those domestic spaces in Maclean's other images, then maybe we can confirm the hypothesis that there is indeed an intangible 'spirit' of possession in the inhabited domestic space.

Just by virtue of the fact that all her images are monochrome, we are aware of looking sideways at reality – figuratively speaking – through Maclean's photographs. They have an authority which is achieved through default and which sidesteps the determinacy of indexicality. A comparable photographer of empty scenes, who also works in monochrome is Craigie Horsfield, however his images are dense, low contrast affairs that seem to suck in light incessantly without relinquishing it again, which gives his work a brooding, introspective mien. Although there is an undoubted poignancy about Maclean's photographs, which are printed straight onto aluminium sheets, the lucent play of incident light gives them a liveliness which imbues them with a seductive allure. Instead of a heaviness which absorbs light, they seem to radiate a luminescence from the enhanced depths of their image; the picture plane appears to have dissolved, and, just as when we

look down into a tank of undisturbed water, we experience difficulty in assessing optically where the surface is, the exact location of the picture plane in these images becomes elusive.

There is a depth of significance in many of Maclean's photographs, which matches their depth of image, but belies their minimal simplicity. In one stretched landscape format photograph of a double bed, with a floral cover, which recedes into the blur of distance, the baroque plant forms of which the design of this cover is constituted, suggest a massed swathe of vegetation stretching into the distance towards the wall behind, which has become a horizon. This horizon is the juncture between the 'real' and the 'apparent' in this image, where, in the absence of occupation, in the isolation of this deserted room, a domestic scene has become transfigured into a landscape, its true identity subverted by Maclean's adroit use of camera angle, wide aperture, and compositional framing. In another image, a room becomes no more than a window onto another landscape, this time a painting – a reproduction of a 19th century landscape painting – whose landscape is, in turn, deserted, hanging on the wall, so the viewer is doubly removed from the subject of this photograph, while the room which is ostensibly the subject becomes

'Sherburn 3', 2002, silver gelatin on aluminium



'Wakefield 1', 2001, silver gelatin on aluminium



'Cover 1', 2002, silver gelatin on aluminium

