JERWOOD **PHOTOGRAPHY** AWARDS

Martin Barnes

The art of photography is vibrantly alive in the UK. Sifting through some five hundred entries for this year's Jerwood Photography Awards revealed for the selectors an impressive array of new talent, with practitioners working in numerous genres and styles to suit their message. The most gripping images carried messages that are well honed, topical and engaging. The best submissions were both visually original and critically astute. They offer an insight into the healthy state of education for practitioners in the UK, the rigour of debate, editing and theoretical discussion that clearly underpins and nurtures the outcomes of the brightest students. Yet artists often describe how challenging it can be to maintain a critical dialogue with others, and a profile for their work, in the years immediately following graduation and the departure from the education system. It is heartening therefore to witness how the Jerwood Photography Awards can provide that platform. The award brings much-deserved attention to some of the finest work coming out of UK degree courses over the last three years.

This year's shortlisted five bodies of work are all highly distinctive. They are dynamic, sophisticated and often challenging. Perhaps, above all, what they appear to have in common is an acute level of social, personal and psychological engagement. Current issues were high on the agenda across all submissions and the winners reflect this trend. It is clear that photographers are probing and commenting boldly upon some of the most prevalent and emotive topics of our time. With the background of a society that is increasingly breaking down its local barriers and embracing a global culture, an overarching concern as a result seems to be that of invisibility, or neglect, of people, objects and environments. As a corollary there are overarching tones of discomfort, uncertainty and pathos. The troubling issues of sexuality and sex as a commodity and the effects of waste on the environment are common to more than one of these bodies of work. It is often the intimate and complex realities of individuals and isolated situations that gives the impact and uncovers the bigger story. The

camera's unique strength has always been that it allows a kind of privileged access to enable the photographer to see and tell such intimate stories, delighting in the boundaries between objective information and subjective opinion.

Moira Lovell's series *After School Club* (2006-07) revels in just such mixed messages and the testing of boundaries. Posing before the gates of their own former schools, the young women in these photographs are dressed in school uniforms as adult party outfits for the 'school disco'. This nightclub phenomenon seems at once liberating, through the adoption of an alternative persona, in the carnival tradition, and yet highly socially controlled. Dislocated from the night-time context of fancy dress and fetish, the women appear unsure of the role they must now play: by turns uncomfortable and forlorn, defensive and coy. As viewers we too feel the discomfort. In the cold light of day, in public, the infantilised sexuality is mildly disturbing. I am reminded of Diane Arbus's notion of the 'gap between intention and effect' that formed the core of her influential and sophisticated understanding of photography in the late 1960s. She noted how photographs ruthlessly pinpointed the threshold between how we think we appear and how we are actually perceived. The two states are often at odds, gaining potency from their conflict and uncertainty. Lovell's artist's statement highlights a further reading of institutional and gender politics into her images that:

> "… abruptly report on how little seems to remain of the schoolyard's openness and curiosity. Yet the suggestion is also that the schools as 'disciplinary' institutions have in some way, as part of today's society, created obedient adherents to the male gaze."

There is something fundamental to photography at play here too about the notion of posing and of being looked at. Lovell deftly shows us how context and setting of a subject can radically alter perception and meaning. Her statement continues, 'The resulting photographs are oddly comic, as the girls appear self-conscious but there is a more powerful feeling of pathos, nostalgia, and the acid tinge of naivety corrupted and exploited.'

That same 'acid tinge' becomes much more bitter and sobering in the works of Dana Popa. She traces the tragically fractured and damaged lives of young girls and women caught up in human trafficking for prostitution within Europe. Popa is a native of Romania, and her focus here is on women caught up in this horror and originating from the neighbouring Republic of Moldova. Popa's work displays the hard authenticity and passion born of local knowledge and a strong sense of the complexities of the situation and its deep injustice.

Moldova is the poorest nation in Europe. Thousands choose to migrate each year. A high proportion of these are women, predominantly between the ages of twelve and forty, who leave the country in the hope of a better life. Yet an alarming number, especially of the younger ones from poor families, fall into the trap of sex traffickers. Moldova has become the main supplier of sex slaves for the whole continent. Each year, at least five hundred women return to Moldova, broken and traumatised from this hellish experience; we can only wonder grimly about those who have not returned. Popa photographed the women in a variety of environments that give stark and revealing context to their tragic stories: in the homes they have returned to, terrified that husbands, partners or parents may find out the terrible secret they are hiding and throw them out; and in the International Organisation of Migration shelters, where Popa encountered girls who had recently been saved from the traffickers. The harrowing captions that accompany the pictures often take the form of reportage too, as quotes from the subjects: "I thought I would work purely as a vendor at the market in Moscow for $200 a month … I never told my friends or my family what happened to me"; or, "My husband sold me for $2,200" and simply, but painfully, 'Why do you have to dig up my life again?' Popa clearly feels that excavating the trauma of individuals is worth the impact her work undoubtedly has and the profile it raises in relation to the problem. To balance the hard documentary facts of the message, the images in the series are filled with a sense of loss, reverie and foreboding. And there is a wider message about identity since the faces are rarely seen (one girl hides her head with the wig she was allowed to wear when she was forced into prostitution). The series title, *Not Natasha* (2006), refers to the nickname given to prostitutes: Popa notes with apt curtness, "Sex trafficked girls hate it". As depicted by the photographer, these women, despite their trauma, are within

themselves defiantly *not* the role they had been forced to assume. At least in this indomitable stance, there is some hope.

Sophie Gerrard is a photojournalist with a similarly strong social conscience. She also examines the potent issues of dire events that may be invisible within the UK but that have massive detrimental effects in other countries. Her project *E-wasteland* (2006) addresses the growing problem of electronic waste in India. Shot in workshops and recycling yards on the outskirts of Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore and Delhi, her images starkly reveal the local and human impact of the West's race for ever-newer information technology and, by implication, the global ramifications of consumer culture. Computers and other electronic equipment that are discarded, predominantly by Europe and the US, create between twenty and fifty million tons of 'e-waste' a year. Apart from the thousands of tons of old computers, mobile phones, batteries, cables and cameras that are dumped in landfill or burned, thousands more are shipped illegally to India and other developing countries for 'recycling'. Gerrard has done her research, and recounts the depressing facts:

> "When the e-waste arrives in India's ports, it is dismantled by hand, incinerated and soaked in acid by workers in backyard recycling scrap yards on the outskirts of many major cities. The workers have no health and safety protection: they work in closed workshops with no gloves, masks or eye protection and no regard for the environment. Once the valuable materials including copper, gold and lead have been removed, the unwanted parts are then dumped in rivers and wasteland or sent to landfill where lethal toxins contaminate the soil, groundwater and air."

Her images do not cast the poor workers as perpetrators of a crime, but rather as helplessly complicit yet fearful of the damage they cause to themselves and the environment. Gerrard neatly confounds what have become the clichés of classic humanist photojournalist: we might at first glance expect the mild-faced woman in a sari to be sitting amid sacks of rice or spices – until we see the tangle of metal they contain. Children run and play amid puddles – but the land is strewn with circuit boards. These images have impact as photographic prints but will work to convey and spread their message perhaps better still on the printed page, in newspapers or

magazines. Thankfully, Gerrard's message is not just powerfully emotive but also deftly political and legally astute. She notes: "The Basel Convention, of which the UK and India are signatories, bans the transportation of hazardous or toxic waste from the developed world to developing countries. This illegal toxic trade is, therefore, in direct violation."

One of the great strengths of photography is its uncanny ability to make visible those things that have somehow fallen out of our normal lines of sight and perception, and thereby to bring home a social, political or philosophical issue we might otherwise ignore. This can, as we have seen, be achieved in the mould of intrepid journalism, reportage or documentary practice. However, there is also the photographic eye that becomes attuned to the strangeness, even surrealism, of ordinary things, particularly of inanimate objects, that somehow gain abstract sculptural qualities and a new informative life through the simple action of being photographed. Kevin Newark's series *Protoplasm* (2005-06) inhabits this photographic tradition with great poetic economy. Newark finds transcendent possibilities in the most common of things, having photographed plastic bags cast adrift in the canals of East London. As with Gerrard's *E-wasteland*, his photographs, point up pressing current issues about waste and its knock-on global effects, but via radically different visual means. Roland Barthes, Newark points out, described plastic, as 'disgraced material', stigmatised by its chemical origins, callous, efficient, indestructible, noxious, and synonymous with refuse. Yet these photographs transform the material momentarily into something precious, jewel-like, reminiscent of cells under a microscope or clouds of gas and matter in distant galaxies. Here, we cannot help but link the microcosm with the macrocosm in a cycle of interdependence. Despite their humble and literally 'throwaway' subject, Newark's images deal less with the specific and more with the grand themes of transformation, space and displacement.

It is not often that serious photographs elicit humour, a quality too rare in contemporary art. However, Edmund Kevill-Davies' series *Puppet Love* (2006-07) does just that – and then makes us ponder its nostalgic and melancholy undercurrent. Ventriloquism is a dying tradition, with its heyday in late nineteenth-century British music hall, and its roots well before that. Fast-moving popular entertainment has little

place for such anachronisms. For many of us, the ventriloquist's dummy has faintly unsettling, even macabre connotations that are difficult to explain. And yet for some, ventriloquism remains entertaining and its survival resides precariously, in most cases, in family tradition. To make this link, Kevill-Davies photographs the ventriloquist's puppets in an off-stage domestic setting; and the families, with their surrogate puppet relations – part child, part pet – pose with compliant, sober concentration for the camera. This work treads a delightfully fine line between mockery and respect. After our initial response to the comedy, we are perhaps entranced by the bizarre similarities between the puppets and the families, as if born out of some Frankenstein genealogy. There is then a poignant feeling about the commitment that the family has to the puppets and the dying art they support. This body of work neatly expresses the obscure and complex meeting point of illusion, reality and theatre: a satisfying trope for photography itself, which – when used with skill and sensitivity as in all the works considered here – inhabits the wonderful hinterland where perception and imagination meaningfully collide.