

'They are documentary photographs of staged events'

interview by Anne-Celine Jaeger

You did both a BA in photographic studies and an MA in photography – Was formal tuition important to you?

I finished my BA in '95 and had a long break. I developed a career in teaching photography before doing my MA. I found being a mature student really advantageous. I took advantage of all the lectures we had, and I was aware that it's a luxury to talk about work at that level. It was great to be in a dialogue with fellow artists and tutors, also in terms of my practice, as my work is usually about a political or socially-involved conceptual viewpoint and the way we see our place in the world. The input and critical feedback I got, as well as the people I met, were all really important. To me it was about getting the balance right. I was teaching photography full-time between the BA and MA, and then started teaching part-time. I find it great to be involved in invigorating discourse about what the medium is doing but at the same time having my own space to make my own work as well.

How did the 'Fire Scene' series come about?

I'd had a contact through the police who suggested that I should contact the Fire Service College, which is in the Cotswolds, because he knew that I was interested in simulation environments. They made me artist-in-residence there. I went round various training facilities at the Fire College, but the 'burns unit' was the most interesting to me. They dress up shipping containers as fire scenes and burn the spaces down to ash. I took images before and after the units burnt down, but to me, the most interesting image was while they were burning. I was fascinated with the suspended moment in time. In terms of genre, they are documentary photographs, but they are of staged events. They are images of institutional representations of the real world. The same goes for *Explosion*. They work in the same way because you feel like you are witnessing something dramatic, but you're not. Although I am photographing something staged, I haven't staged the events. I think it's more revealing than me saying 'this is the way that I think we could be represented'. I feel like there's a certain amount of extra resonance. I think photography has a difficult relationship in the art world. It's been criticised for there not being enough personal investment in the making of an image, unless you make something in front of the camera as well. I have a lot of respect for the work of photographers who construct scenes to be photographed, but I feel that I'm reacting against that.

In both your 'Explosion' series (2004/2005) as well as the 'Fire Scene' series (2007) you focus on photographing artificial instances that have a semblance of 'the real'. What do you hope to evoke in the viewer with these series?

I think there's a certain element of having some kind of vicarious thrill seeing something dramatic. I think we've got a really interesting but dubious relationship to extreme events; if you think about the way that TV programs are making documentaries and dramas, there's a fine line where disaster becomes entertainment. And you'll get eye-witnesses to extreme events describing them as 'filmic' or 'like in a movie'. I'm interested in looking at the real and the imagined, and how complex our relationships to these things are. The simulations are real events and are a way of controlling and understanding the unexpected, so they're reassuring and uncomfortable at the same time. As abstractions they're strangely seductive.

Which photographers and/or experiences have informed the way you work?

There are two factors, personally that have brought me to the point I'm at. One is having quite a controlling father with a working-class background, and the other is having a mother who worries about the worse case scenario. She's got the SAS Survival handbook and will tell me random tips such as how to survive being chased by a swarm of bees. So I spent my childhood rebelling against rules and thinking about imminent disasters! In terms of photographers I like, my tastes are really eclectic but I really enjoy Naoya Hatakeyama's work.

There are more and more students graduating from photography schools – what makes one image/or photography graduate stand out more than the next?

I do talks at universities and I see that now more than ever, because people are having to pay so much to put themselves through college, students are thinking about 'how to make it'. Those were never my motivations. I've always been motivated by making the work and by my own interests. One of the good things about teaching is that I'm not dependent on art-work for survival.

What effect did winning the Jerwood Photography Award and the Photographers Gallery Graduate Award in 2005 have on your career?

Val Williams was one of judges for the Jerwood and she also curated 'How We Are' at the Tate Britain and some of my work ended up in the show. Also the Photographers' Gallery took my work to Photo Paris and showed it in Print Sales. It had tangible effects. In the US, where I'm represented by Daniel Cooney Fine Art, those awards are seen as good endorsements.

What are you currently working on?

I'm currently printing a black and white series called *Incident*. It's also shot at the Fire College, it's just taken me a bit longer to resolve what media and paper to use. I'm researching and developing links with organisations for a new project, but as with all my work it's dependent on their support for anything to happen.

Sarah Pickering went on holiday shortly after the interview. There was a bee's nest in the wall of the cottage and she was glad to have her mother's tips in mind as 50 bees had crawled out of the wall overnight and into the living room. Thanks to her mother's worst-case scenario advice, she knew what to do...