

Fade to Black : Sarah Pickering's 'Incident' Pictures

Jason Evans for Photoworks Magazine
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On a foggy autumn morning walking my usual route to the sixth form I noticed smoke coming from a window. 'Burning toast' I thought. No answer to my knock, I tried the door and let myself in. I called out to the silence. No smoking toaster in the kitchen. The hall gave way to a bathroom with a neat row of women's underwear drying on the edge of an avocado bath. In front of me was a closed door with a warm handle. Foolishly I opened the door and was engulfed in an avalanche of smoke. I ran out of the flat, calling for help, banging on doors. The outside world was as still and as quiet as the scene from which I'd fled. The smoke and the fog were in cahoots. Looking up at the outside of the building I could get a sense of the layout and ran back in, taking a hand towel from the bathroom to cover my face I ducked low where the smoke was thinner, like they do on television. Venturing back into the room I saw Beethoven's furious scowl staring at me through the eddying cloud atop a pile of records. There was no fire, just foul smelling smoke. I located another closed door and entered what turned out to be a bedroom. It was very hot and dark. Instinctively I flicked the light switch, causing the bulb to short with the pop of a flashgun, revealing dreadful stains that ran down the walls where soot had congealed into the condensation. I pulled back the curtains, opened the window, getting the rusty brown liquid, the colour of dried blood, on my hands. Disgusted and afraid I again fled the flat. Yelling for help, in floods of tears now, a blank row of startled faces viewed my panic from an office window above. I ran back into the flat where the smoke was clearing a little. I had seen a figure lying on the bed. I had to get them out. Back in the bedroom I leant forward over the person who lay in his clothes on the bed, the foot of which was melted like a Dali clock. I shook his shoulder, to rouse him, too shocked to notice he was as stiff as a board, I tried to lift him. I shouted at him to wake up. Looking into the sooty shadows where his face would have been, had the smouldering bedclothes ignited by his last cigarette not melted the front of his head into an oblivion.

When I look at Sarah Pickering's fire pictures I cannot help but be transported back to that awful moment when I realised that a man's face was just so much char. It's why I wanted to write this. The seductive velvety depth of the blacks invite a macabre caress. Both in the described formative situation and in the sooty-matt tones of Pickering's prints my mind's eye struggle to grasp the features, both objectively and intellectually, like staring into a well-lit infinity cove, the studio photographers' imaginary-space. No corners, no edges. Nothing like a photograph. I was 17 years old, in the throes of common teenage angst, which were erroneously affirmed on finding that body and seeing what I saw. When I talk to Sarah about her work I cannot help but to wonder about her formative experiences, what compulsion keeps taking her to the extreme scenarios that make up her oeuvre. After all, are we not a little like light sensitive material ourselves? Repeatedly exposed frames, recording indelible experience and re-presenting it when prompted. Isn't that what therapists tell us? Our film will not wind-on unless we crank it. Sarah Pickering remembers as a child a copy of the SAS handbook kept to hand by her ready-for-the worst mother.

There is a violent trajectory running through the works made by Pickering. In the 'Public Order' series, begun in 2002, an eerie calm pervades over vacuous urban scenes. Welcome to Anywhere. Constructed for the purpose of crowd control exercises, they belie a committee-minded town plan for a stage-managed non event. Life strangled at birth. The photographs themselves are non-suggestively flat, nothing to see here.

This is given up in the 'Explosion' series made between 2004-5. Similarly unremarkable wasteland becomes the setting for another constructed spectacle. Replica munitions simulate a variety of incendiary types, again for the purposes of training.

The silent allure that these impotent flashes exude is less shock and awe and more the snuff of special effect. These events in turn could be seen as the precursors for the 'Fire Scene' series of 2007. Again a record of a construct, this time more scrupulous in their basis of actual events, like a borrowed plot line. They are tenuously photographed in portrait format as if to insinuate the missing imaginary person.

The reoccurring themes of faked realities and present absence are the underlying motifs of Pickering's investigative work and are no more sentient than in her most recent series made over the last 2 years, 'Incident'. These pictures draw a logical conclusion to her survey, the charred remains, and fade to black in anxious times.

The new pictures sit comfortably in the uncomfortable conditions of our present societal subconscious. The Joy of Doom is all around us. All declining cultures imagine their demise to be *the* demise, but as Accelerated Capitalism's unsustainable programme eats itself alive we find ourselves out-manoeuvred by its legacies at present.

The pictures could act as illustrations to Cormac McCarthy's last, astringent novel 'The Road' in which a father and son walk to the edge of their burned out continent with nowhere else to go. A contemporary musical accompaniment might be Earth's lethargic 'Hex' album, itself inspired by McCarthy's vision, and from the musician, Dylan Carlson, that gave us the portents for contemporary drone Rock. Earth are the inspiration for hipster darlings Sunn0))) (named from an amplification system) who wear cowls and monkish robes on stage. Since when does a pretended Noise-Metal tribute band become the stuff of mainstream music editorial? Sunn0))) themselves have played with and been basis for recent works by American sculptor Banks Violette (good name, cool tattoos). His sleekly manicured installations, a life-style-choice baby spawned of Rebecca Horn and Steven Parrino, drip with Doom Chic. In recent Fashion Industry stakes, arguably the most underground mainstreamer, has been designer/photographer/stylist Hedi Slimane. He brought a similar reapplication of the aesthetics of poverty and despair to the Catwalks and so the index linked High Streets. You can blame him for tight black trousers and a resurgence of Joy Division t-shirts. Pickering's new pictures transcend the theatre and appropriation described above, by acting in a deceptively simple documentary style record of the Incident Training Ground at the Fire Service College at Moreton in Marsh where she was artist in residence in 2006-7. She says, "there is something generic and inconsequential about the spaces I photographed." In their everyday, glows their horror, like in Martha Rosler's Vietnam enraged intervention montages 'Bringing the war home'.

Light usually comes from above. The gradient of light to dark, top to bottom, as intimated in the title, is reversed in the 'Incident' series and replaced with a gradual build up of soot. As medium format black and white negatives the smudges of activity recorded are themselves reminiscent of negative surface damage. I get a real sense of looking at photographic production with this work. Never mind the skeleton of a bed and the pile of bodies blocking the escalator and the burned out Boots chemist counter, the subject matter becomes somehow peripheral to the intended quality of images that look as though they could become wind born ash at the merest breeze.