

ARTICLES

REVIEW

Edge of Empire

David McNeill reviews Phillip George's Edge of Empire exhibition, which ran from 11 June-10 July at Sydney's Breenspace gallery. Drawing on various influences, the works are an interesting amalgamation of East and West.

Throughout much of its history the camera has been treated as a mechanical surrogate for human vision. In both processes, light passes through a lens and is registered on a surface consisting of either photosensitive chemicals or bundled nerve-endings. Many of the characteristics of the photographic image seem to closely approximate those of vision as we subjectively experience it. For example, the photograph exhibits the same spherical aberration and depth of field limitations that characterise bio-optics.

Despite these concordances, and many others besides, the photograph's puzzling disjunctions and aporia remain to render it strangely disquieting as a substitute for "what we would have seen had we been there". The Surrealists were the first to alert us to the aesthetic potential that resides in this imperfect correlation of vision and photography but, by and large, in most of the fields in which it has been deployed, the photograph has still managed to trade unapologetically on the analogous relationship between optics and perception.

Or rather, it managed to do so until the closing decade of the 20th century. The development of digital photography has severed this traditional nexus irreparably. The digital image, unlike its celluloid ancestor, is registered in computational form and is therefore more analogous to conceptualisation than to optics. Furthermore, the invention and deployment of computer programmes such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator have enabled the transformation and refinement of the image in ways that distance it profoundly from any perceptible real world correlates. The photograph in its new digital guise has thus shed its old documentary skin and has instead clothed itself in all the imaginative and fantastic possibilities of a medium such as painting.

The artist Philip George has been working with digital photography from its inception. Trained as a painter, he was quick to pick up on the possibilities of applying a painter's sensibility to this new medium. The combined application of *raster* and *vector* programmes enabled him (and others of his generation) to create images that occupy a realm that the theorist Paul Virilio has characterised as that of "big optics", understood as "the active optics of time passing at the speed of light" (Virilio, P. *Open Sky*. Verso 1997). This is a realm unavailable to the "small optics" of the human eye, or, for that matter to traditional lens or celluloid photography. These new image technologies facilitate the



'Paradise Suite East'. 2010
C-Type print.



'Paradise Suite Persia'. 20:
C-Type print.

production of expansive polyglot images that can be made to serve as corollaries of the transnational flows, planetary exchanges and far-flung tensions that are such a ubiquitous feature of life in the epoch of globalisation. Such 'pictures' can make material a truly post-panoramic outlook unavailable to human sight.

George is descended from Alexandrian Greeks and he has inherited a cultural sensibility that is founded in a respect for the history and values of the so-called Middle East. He uses the expansive possibilities of his post-photographic practice to undercut Eurocentric assumptions and prejudices. For example, he has previously produced a series of Islamic patterned surfboards that received a good deal of local and international attention. These works drew attention both to a particularly distasteful outbreak of anti-Islamic racism on Sydney's beaches in 2005 and also to the potential for richer forms of cross-cultural understanding opened up by the new technologies of global web 'surfing'.

His recent exhibition at Breenspace Gallery in Sydney combined his emerging sculptural concerns with those of his established photographic practice. At the entrance to the gallery, a large model *Predator* drone was hung on a wall like a Christian crucifix but it was decorated with Islamic patterns and the Arabic translation of 'boomerang'. The work conjures the arrogance of a European/American perspective on Islamic culture that is characterised by a safe panoptic distance punctuated with occasional forensic isolation of detail. The drone is conscripted as a metaphor for a menacing neo-colonial surveillance that prohibits the possibility of any genuinely empathic exchange or engagement.

George's photographs pursue this dialectic of the micro and macro viewpoints. His large sublime landscapes capture the unique beauty of the Syrian desert surrounding Palmyra while his close-focus photographs of roses mobilise all the possibilities of digital transformation. The rose is a flower with an exceedingly rich semiotic history and it is Persian in origin. It has symbolised love in many cultures but also secrecy (*sub rosa*) and it is also utilised as a symbol of martyrdom by both Christians and Muslims. George's roses are digitally overlaid with *Tree of Life* and *Garden of Paradise* images sourced from the Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan Mosque in Abu Dhabi, The Shi'ite Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque in Shiraz and Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. The effect of these juxtapositions is breathtakingly gorgeous; the colours are saturated and the patterning on the rose leaves invites the spectator to approach closely and seek out detail. In these works, the kind of botanical breeding and grafting that has obsessed rose growers across so many cultures for eons

becomes suggestive of a more general interconnectedness of cultural practice and evolution associated with the term 'hybridity' as it has been so often used in postcolonial theory.

Like so many of his like-minded contemporaries, George still describes his work as photography, but faced with such rich and evocative global image-composites, we may be forgiven if we find this historically laden term no longer adequate! Just as our memories take the form of complex assemblages that freely move across space and time, so too do George's works produce their effects by deploying the kind of promiscuous and ecumenical compression of time and space that is so central to our experience of the transnational world that we now inhabit. By leaving the limitations of human vision far behind them, they offer an eloquent argument for the wonders of a world that will always confound sedentary or close-minded speculation. They capture, as few other Contemporary artworks have managed to do, the poetics of a 'transnational sublime'.

By Dr David McNeill

Deputy Director, Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics,

University of New South Wales,

d.mcneill@unsw.edu.au

Images courtesy the artist. For more information visit
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