

Dark Stories: Photographs by Sharon Green and Stephen Danzig

"Theatricality in early twenty-first century photography makes no effort to deny the audience or its own constructed fictions. Rather, it invites viewers to participate in an imaginative engagement with representation itself and with the state of affairs in society in general."¹

Since the 1980s there has been an exciting burgeoning of Australian artists using photo-based media to create narrative pictures. Referencing a diverse range of sources including mass media, electronic games, historical paintings, literature and of course cinema; contemporary artists construct richly layered stories encapsulated within a single image. The idea of a 'narrative photograph' would seem to be an oxymoron, but still pictures can be loaded with ciphers open to interpretation and inviting us to 'fill in the blanks' and create our own story. Great storytelling, in any media, leads the audience reader or viewer on a journey of discovery in which the cumulative experiences of the individual inform their interpretation of the narrative.

In their recent work Australian artists Sharon Green and Stephen Danzig have produced complex, and at times ambiguous images. Despite using different media, referencing diverse sources and addressing a variety of concerns, both artists have constructed narratives in which violence and the darker side of human nature feature in lead roles.

In her 2005 series, *The Lonely Empire*, Sharon Green created a series of tableaux that draws the viewer into a dark and deliciously dangerous realm in

¹ Karen Henry, *The Artful Disposition: Theatricality, Cinema, and Socila Context in Contemporary Photography* in Lori Pauli (ed) *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2006, p154.

which the tension between the unseen hunter and their prey suggests a frightening game. The narrative that Green has woven is at once attractive and repulsive. There is a thrilling sense of the forbidden in her work and enough mystery surrounding the actions described in her photographs to lead the viewer to fantasize about what it is exactly they have stumbled upon. Indeed, as Bec Dean wrote, "...it is in the spaces between these pictures that we as viewers can build delicious narratives fuelled by our own reserves of memory and imagination."²

In this series, as in previous bodies of work, Green draws parallels between courtship and capture. The hunted: birds, deer, even the predatory fox, are shown as trophies. They have been caught, preserved by taxidermists and mounted either on the wall or in elaborate museum-like settings. With glassy eyes and unnaturally frozen stances they suggest lingering memories of a bad dream or a gothic horror movie. Even more unnerving is the young woman who periodically appears in this disturbing drama. In one photograph she is a shadowy character reflected in a baroque-style mirror, in another she appears bearing a bloodied image of a rearing horse precisely incised on her chest. On an initial reading it seems that the young woman is another trophy, but there is enough ambiguity inherent in these works to raise the possibility that she is perhaps a player in this dangerous game.

Sharon Green references historical literature and cinema in her image making, and in doing so establishes a link to narrative traditions in the medium in her photographs. Stephen Danzig, on the other hand, uses more contemporary sources, particularly electronic mass media and games, to allude to the stories behind the news that we avidly consume each day.

² Bec Dean, *The Lonely Empire*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2005

Produced in 2006, Danzig's series, *Chapters From The Outside World*, uses the imagery of surveillance and violence, all too familiar to us through the electronic media, including blurry pictures of missiles in flight and stealth bombers en-route. This is the landscape of contemporary warfare. Most of us watch it on television, abstracted and rendered digitally, at a safe, de-sensitised distance. Danzig's images are presented in triptychs, some using characters familiar from the nightly drama on the small screen: the soldier, the journalist and the civilian.

The allied armies of Australia and the United States are shown as interchangeable pawns in the work *Super Hero*. The men involved on the ground appear as faceless troops flanking a platoon of digital super soldiers ready to go forward into battle in the game of war. But, it is no game as we are reminded in the work titled *Pishtee*. In this image we are presented with an aerial view of a city, the kind of image generated by the plethora of satellites circling and photographing the planet. In the military arena photographs such as this provide details used to 'strategically target' enemy sites. From such a distant perspective it is easier to ignore the inevitable human toll on the ground. Danzig does not allow us this luxury. This strategic landscape is overlaid with images of a woman's legs; bruised and grazed they are an immediate reminder that people, not just buildings, are damaged in each of these incursions.

Another reminder of the human face of conflict is the sight of the kidnapped journalist. We are all too familiar with the stories of soldiers, aid workers, mercenaries and journalists taken captive: sometimes freed, sometimes executed. These personal tragedies unfold in sequences of drama played out on television screens around the globe. In the multi-panelled work *News Reader*, Danzig confronts us with a sequence of portraits showing a tortured journalist. The central panel shows the vast sky and dust coloured plain of a Middle Eastern desert, in the foreground a flagpole bears the standard "Bla blabla" ominously

crossed out in blood. The implication of violence is clear. What is less certain is whether the journalist is the victim of enemy combatants or his own 'bla bla bla'.

Although theatrical in nature, the work of Stephen Danzig and Sharon Green rewards considered viewing with insights into some of the issues at the forefront of contemporary discourse. As such they are among the artists taking on the role of 'story teller' and offering incisive reflections on the world today.

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