

DOMOBAAL

Siân Pile

Photography: between the known and the unknown

by Dr. Sarah James

In the glasshouse the air is close; you can almost hear the plants breathing in carbon-dioxide and softly expelling oxygen. In the playground the fog flattens, stifles, and loosens you all at the same time. Ribbons of florescent tape demarcate a pointless space with the conviction of calligraphy. An outing to the beach, a monstrosity of familial and habitual ceremony finds you dwarfed by cliffs with an audience of passers-by, passing by. This is something indescribable: a constant state - a landscape - of experience, not personal, but abstract, a visual monologue, the place where the interior and external meet. You can't accurately describe the experience, or the memory of it, or the experiential part of anamnesis. You can't speak it. When you speak, nothing but slow, oily silence comes out of your mouth. When you try to make such experience take written form the awkwardly-hewn syllables don't come close to articulating it. Where words fail, the fragility of photography survives the moment, measures the abstract and emerges metaphorically as the only medium capable of formalising these complex apperceptions.

Siân Pile's beautifully meticulous images use the strange power of photography - its curious duality as a medium of both veracity and illusion - to give aesthetic form to the abstraction that surrounds acts of seeing and reflection. If photography has been overwhelmed by language, Pile's work tries to remember its material and alchemic origins. Taking pleasure in its ambivalence, she uses photography to mine the pre-linguistic, the mimetic moments when a person feels entirely inseparable from the time and place of experience. Pile's work undercuts photography's banal and blatant semiotic function. Like an autistic child who, when you point at an object is more interested in the finger that points than the object signified, her photography ruins the grounds of signification and the narrative that too readily turns symbols into language.

Looking at Pile's work - her series *The Playground*, *The Beach*, *The Walk*, and *Sand Dunes* (all 2006) - one is immediately aware that she is not afraid of photography's intrinsically aesthetic nature. Her images possess an incredible delicacy and ornament, a gestural quality. You can almost feel the perfectly focused leaves scratching under your skin. The fine patterns of rocks are both exhilaratingly and terrifyingly tactile. The intricate silhouettes of ferns hang, fusty, like an over-bearing Victorian motif. Each work goes beyond the snapshot, testifying to a slower time: the never-ending moment, or years of expression. Pile seems to take pleasure in the irremediable nature of her chosen medium, the necessarily incomplete and abstract nature of the photograph; this imperfect and untrustworthy document. However, Pile is not interested in the obviously corrupt nature of the photographic image, or in the ability of the photographer to invent, arrange and adulterate. Instead, her work does something both far more difficult and far more interesting. It forgives the medium its misuses and abuses and attempts to explore the shadowy regions of its veracity, acuity, and testimony. As if to attempt to redeem the proximity photography has to memory, its unique ability to mark time, Pile takes a sort of scotomaphobic pleasure in recording every tiny detail and minutia. She revels in photography's visuality, that which makes it irreducible to text, that which makes it other to the written word. Pile's exact and careful images rediscover the objects that much recent photography has lost.

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In the series Undergrowth, (2007) Pile has found the photographic process perfectly commensurate with the conceptual nature of her work. The first thing one is struck by upon looking at the works is how 'unphotographic' they look. Far from the crisp lines of her previous series, here shapes emerge like pastel smudges or chalk blotches on coarse matt paper. However, paradoxically, in another sense these are the most photographic of Pile's photographs, taking the medium back to the magic that underwrote its invention. Here she has utilised platinum printing, an almost obsolete monochrome photographic process dating from the nineteenth century, whereby ferric oxalate is reduced to ferrous oxalate by UV-light, and requiring much longer exposure times than those used in silver-based photographic processes thus achieving much greater tonal range. Because of the non-uniformity of the coating and mixing phases of the process no two prints are exactly the same, and the subjective judgment of the individual printing becomes paramount. As Pile had to surrender the negatives to a specialist studio, her ordinarily personal and fastidious printing process was placed in the hands of a stranger, and the results must have been greeted with a similar suspense and awe as that felt by Nicéphore Niépce when he saw his first Heliograph, the earliest ever permanent photograph. The experience and act of photographing is distanced from the final aesthetic form, to which, perversely, it remains so intensely attached.

Pile's platinotypes depict a strange woodland from such a low perspective it feels as though you are within the undergrowth, surrounded by dried cow parsley and bracken. There is no sense of the time of day, but perhaps the visions of a nocturnal mind prone to early morning awakenings. So unlike today's glossy prints, the absolutely non-reflective surface of the images and their delicate, fuzzy but large tonal range confound one's expectations of photography. Further, they have the solidity and temporality of old photographs, often attributed to a lengthier exposure time. These works are so real they appear surreal. As the archaic process is unusually stable, platinum prints are far less susceptible to deterioration than most photographs, so unlike the ubiquitous flood of images that emerge and die virtually, this photography - as ambivalent and abstract and difficult as it stands - is here to stay. Pile has found the ur-photograph, the most visual, most material object, steeped in time but also shrouded in mythology. This series, like all of Siân Pile's work, reaffirms photography as an object of immanent construction, figuration and deciphering, and returns it to where it belongs: that place between the known and the unknown.

Dr Sarah James

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