

## cover-story for London Art Magazine "contemporary" n°56

Profile

Roland Fischer

Whereas documentary photography records what has been, Roland Fischer evokes an eternal sense of what *is*. His main concern is the eloquence of the image whether of nuns and monks, bathers or architecture and his sensitivity is pitched towards the aesthetic rather than the anthropological or sociological. Through this tilt of focus, his portraits occupy the present or, rather, timeless tense; our experience of the photograph becomes more important than our understanding of the subject matter.

In Fischers *Los Angeles Portraits* (1989/93), individuals are submerged to their clavicles in swimming pools. Their accoutrements of personality, such as clothing, accessories or contextualising props, have been left in the changing room and their deadpan expressions reveal nothing about their mood or temperament. Even hairstyles seem to have been suppressed so that the portrait gives away little about the socio-economic status of the sitter or even the era in which they live. It is only our understanding of photographic technology that can place the image after the technicolour of the 1960s and the blissed-out quality of the 70s. The level of resolution that photorealist painters have always aspired to has only really been achieved in photography in the last two decades.

This cart-before-the-horse nature of photorealism may have prepared us for the almost blinding clarity of, say Rineke Dijkstra or Thomas Struth, yet their humanist realism is not what Fischer is pursuing. His formal constructions don't reveal the whole story behind their subjects by any means. The pools in the *Los Angeles Portraits* are as important as the faces; the water blocks our view of the body, yet provides a monochrome backdrop with implied depth, against which to project our expectations. By denying us specifics, the all-engulfing void gives preconceived ideas free rein to imagine a type of person that might live in LA and languish in pools. But again, this is not Fischers intention. His original location for

the pool-based portraits was Southern Germany, but he found that the broad, steady daylight and ostentatious array of swimming pools in LA allowed many more inflections than in Europe. The choice of location was more pragmatic than ideological as, in this instance, the quality of the image is more important than the implications of place.

Like the intangible atmosphere of the *Los Angeles Portraits*, Fischers *Nuns and Monks* series (1984), reveals little of the sitters lives of devotion and self-sacrifice. Their cowls and habits, which would usually be expected to communicate the immensities of religion and privation, have more to do with the visual isolation of the face: I wanted at the time to create images where the human face was framed, so the choice was either sheikhs or nuns. After testing both, I ended up with the nuns and monks, because the form itself had more meaning here. These portraits are not a reflection of personal realities, but a visual rewrite in a stark language that cannot accommodate the past. Our understanding of the people and places is the affect of their image on us, as they loom large in the gallery or stare out from the page. The reduced nature of the imagery makes our visual perception all the more keen, magnifying every blemish, asymmetry and cant. In a way, we become the active subject, as we compare one objectified face with another.

Throughout the history of portraiture, objectivity and documentation see-saw in and out of precedence over subjectivity and symbolism. The finite, singular subject leads to our understanding of universal themes, while our individuating tendencies link generalities back to our own experience. Fischer creates a pictorial environment in which these dualisms dilate and declare their inversely proportional relationship. The tension between formal composition and implied content is wire-tight. He describes this tension as the vital, humanist essence of his portraiture: As I see it, human existence is situated between freedom and determination. By analogy, and as far as the pictorial plane is concerned, Im also interested in Ö the similarly dynamic relationships between freedom and form, between freedom and the obligations entailed by our integration within a larger whole. In my view, these relationships arent dualistic, they are in dialogue. Consequently, the notion of

transparency, the various ways these two principles fit within one another, is very decisive for me. After all, we are not entirely matter, nor are we entirely idea.

This integration within a larger whole, or the relationship between the one and the many a political axiom that has been reconfigured in many social models from feudalism to communism to high capitalism is more directly referenced in Fischers *Group Portraits*, which he started in China in 1998. Whereas the *Los Angeles Portraits* present people for our scrutiny one at a time, these large compound images of steel workers, soldiers or students, tiled like sheets of postage stamps, parade reams of individuals before us. Perhaps it is because the people portrayed live in a Communist nation that the engulfment of the one by the many seems so potent. However, the initial impression of visual clamour soon gives way to a coherent series of singular head shots, a grid of faces that can be discerned one at a time. The eye can work either at random, attracted by idiosyncrasies, or methodically along the rows or columns. Either way, the process of looking never quite separates a single face from the peripheral view of its neighbours; each person is forever flanked by others to which he or she can be compared. Ears in, eyes out, chin lengthened, hair shortened we might be tempted to apply the dark science of eugenics to such a close-knit social group.

Although some of these series of portraits have been compiled digitally, none have been manipulated in any other way. Even the sonorous blues and turquoises of the pools in the *Los Angeles Portraits* have not been digitally enhanced. Fischer tends to work only with the camera and natural and artificial lights. Often this requires demanding situations, such as submerged models in Neoprene suits waiting in front of scientifically-constructed shades for hours until the conditions are just right. The long exposures required result in shallow depths of field that enhance the immediacy of the image. Without pronounced perspective, the window-like potential of the photograph doesn't quite take off. These are contained atmospheres in which the subjects exist beyond the geometry of landscape.

Fischer however, does use digital manipulation, albeit minimally, in his *Cathedrals* series, which he began in 1995. In these he expresses a paradox of space,

superimposing the interior of a building onto its exterior. He explains the apparently loaded choice of architecture: The only buildings which provide an interior related to their exterior in terms of structure and size are cathedrals. The starting point is a formal idea and later, as the work develops, you can of course discover all kinds of approaches in it. Fischers choice of cathedrals began with Gothic architecture, such as Strasbourg and Notre Dame, then moved onto Baroque, Renaissance and Orientalism. The imagery is often difficult to read and the two layers nearly impossible to peel away from one another, the improbable complexes of arcs and columns become a salad of decoration and structure.

It would be tempting to make the connection between Fischers imagery and his ideology, to assume that the artist has chosen to document religious architecture and practitioners to reflect his own convictions. But this is not the case. For Fischer monks, nuns and cathedrals are simply interesting visual phenomena to be explored for how they appear, not what they represent. It is also crass, perhaps, to suggest that there is a parallel between the buildings and the human portraits, that facade and interior correlate with appearance and soul. But, nonetheless, there is an equivalence between the polarities of spiritual thought and ecclesiastical ritual, and those of personal life and social behaviour.

In *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord describes the increasing domination of economy over social life, proposing that the feudal system was an era of being and the capitalist era one of having, with the high-capitalism of the twentieth century finally degrading to a culture of appearing. He suggests that experience is mediated through representation and is no longer directly lived. In a way, Fischers work reflects on this theory; the clatter of dematerialisation resounds throughout his work as archetypes are stripped of significance and animal and mineral essence are converted into autonomous pictorial codes. As Fischer says: the only thing that counts is the final image, the outcome of the work. I dont see it as a question of fiction versus documentation, the authenticity of an artwork has, in my opinion, nothing to do with realism.

The geometric, abstract patterns of the *Façades* series, derived from huge,

shiny, Postmodern urban monoliths, are a distillation of this position. Fischer began photographing corporate buildings in China in 1998, converting them into Modernist exercises of pattern and colour by cropping out all vestiges of figurative context. Unlike the cathedrals, the façades bear no witness to the activity that goes on beyond the exterior of the buildings, as the plane of the photograph severs us from the human occupation within. Like found versions of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-3), or Sarah Morriss vertiginous cityscapes without the perspective, the images are more abstract evocations than photographic representations.

Fischer's most recent project *Pilgrims* (2003) is at Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea in Santiago de Compostela, Galicia until early December. A new group portrait, featuring 1050 pilgrims, will be accompanied by 15 new, large-scale cathedral images. In March this year, Fischer travelled by car from Roncesvales (in the Spanish Pyrenees) to Santiago de Compostela a historical pilgrimage route known as the French Way and photographed all the churches and cathedrals he passed. In April, he took portraits of pilgrims from all over the world as they were arriving for *Semana Santa*, the holy week. In grids six meters wide, much larger than the *Chinese Group Portraits*, these compound images truly communicate the power of mass movement. They represent a meeting point of much of Fischer's previous work: the vacated religious symbolism of both the *Nuns and Monks* and *Cathedrals* series, as well as the optical thrum of the *Group Portraits*.

Fischer's ongoing projects are, if not boundless, then potentially vast. By using the grid, a systematic approach and reductivist aesthetic, and working in series, he refers to Modernist practice. His subject matter, however, is classical: busts, temples (whether to Mammon or other deities), ecclesiastes, bathers, beauty and geometry. The cleanliness of photography can accommodate this convergence of Modernism and Classicism, which painting would perhaps over-articulate through the artist's painterly mannerisms. Here the artist's hand is not directly evident like Conceptualism or roasting meat, the essence is embedded in choice and staging rather than expressive execution. Although Fischer's images are constructed, they have a sense of inevitability, an archetypal presence which comes from a Classicism that is

adroitly served up with technological precision.

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