

# WHISPERS

Text by Paola Anselmi, 2008

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*'In so far as photography does peel away the dry wrappers of habitual seeing, it creates another habit of seeing; both intense and cool, solicitous and detached; charmed by the insignificant detail, addicted to incongruity.'*<sup>1</sup>

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It is often challenging and always a privilege to be invited into someone's private inner world, to be able to identify with a body of work by way of its original intent, to be privy to the reasons that fuel the initial investigation of a topic or a theme. *drei* as a series of works is as much a portrait of the artist as a detailed inquiry into the relationship between image, perception and meaning.

Chris Young's photographic discourse is logically constructed as well as subtle, intricate and personal. It is influenced by an interest in self scrutiny within both a personal and universal framework, combined with a profound interest in art historical contexts dealing with issues of originality and the manipulation of the image, intention versus chance and accident, truthfulness and myth making inherent in the photographic process.

In a recent conversation with the artist, Young used the Japanese term *wabi sabi* while discussing the process of image making in *drei*. The term refers to the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and eventually death and thus respecting authenticity above all qualities. Young further develops the interaction between context and content by coupling a spatial image or location with a portrait, which in all its intensity does not attempt to belie the inherent fleshy nakedness of the sitter and allows the essence of the portrait to expose its imperfections and incongruities.

The works featured in *drei* rest on three fundamental concepts: context, narrative and space. Each concept builds upon the question of capturing an image and allowing it to sit within a gap of meaning, a suspended pause that holds more questions than answers. This is the space between action and inaction, between anxiety and composure, between puzzlement and realisation. The pile of rubble and bicycles, the white door and overhanging fan, the pink room and blue plastic chair have one thing in common, they are true representations of factual settings and have not been manipulated – nothing animate or inanimate was stage set by Young.

The manipulation of the scene is inherent in the choice Young makes; what is or is not photographed, what is eventually used and how they are paired and displayed. The selection of one image over another, the treatment of light, cropping of

the picture and their final pairing are the techniques the artist has chosen to define and brand his narrative within the initial parameters of chance and accident. Young has focussed on a fixed symmetry of place, an almost starched setting. It is this sense of order and stability that heightens the expressive content and loads a deceptively silent image with whispered meanings.

The images are filled with considered contradictions. Is it essentially what is not photographed that grounds the narrative in a surreal space animated by a sense of uncertainty, vulnerability and sometimes danger. Each image has an access point, an area to lure in the viewer. It is a rough patch of blue wall, a door left ajar, an empty chair or a fire extinguisher left unattended on the floor. These spaces and objects are not ambiguous in themselves – it is the cropping of the image, its perspective and our engagement with an action that is not defined that feeds our imagination.

The juxtaposition of light and dark, black and white with colour further emphasise the photographer's interest in discordance and opposites; positive and negative, presence and absence. The appearance of the settings is raw and flawed – cigarette butts, rubbish, bits of paper, chalk marks on black boards, frayed edges – yet they are also vivid, light and breezy. While the colours are serene and uncomplicated – pinks, blues, rich browns, whites – the implied spaces and formal composition communicate feelings of danger, darkness and foreboding.

Chris sees his images as loaded with timeless stories, shifting, changeable, inconsistent within any definable timeline. These images of objects and places lead to us to ask 'how', 'who' or 'why'. It is these questions, inherent in these imaginary narratives that lie at the heart Young's recent body of work.

A chair has a clear and fundamental function but its identity is coloured by its context and location. One of Young's favourite objects, it becomes a vehicle for numerous narratives – a waiting room chair, a classroom chair, an interview chair, a wooden bench. Each leads the viewer to engage with that frame of time between an implied action waiting to happen, having already happened or happening concealed within the image. The viewer is invited into the set but is not handed a script. Young would never pen one, his interest lies in the ambiguity of expression and the conditions that shift meaning, its context.



The act of pairing the images in the exhibition carries with it a deeply felt need to evaluate Young's own position in a context of engagement with his own work, his ongoing practice and the everyday world around him. At its core is an investigation into the understanding of self, the interaction between real and perceived self, how we know ourselves and how others see us, as well as what we show of ourselves, consciously or otherwise.

The final portrait prints are large, often confronting in as much as they observe, scrutinise and follow the viewer as freely as the viewer analyses and dissects each image. The sitter is undaunted, sometimes challenging and always conscious of the action that is taking place, it is captured but is not silent. The relationship that is created between the observer and the observed creates an intimacy that cuts both ways.

The images are fragments in time, fragments of places, spaces, faces and lives – in all, they are only fragments of reality and as such, they mimic the idea that reality is perceived and subjective, it is mutable and fast moving, it is disjointed and associative. The inherent duality of opposites; reality and illusion, truth and falsehood, a constructed identity and a predetermined self, inform the decision to bring together



these images as pairs, allowing them to suspend meaning within the ambiguous space between action and inaction, truth and metaphor. Chris Young describes the balance between observational study and manipulation of a setting as parallel to the relationship between *taking* an image versus *making one*. In *drei* Young has successfully done both.

Chris Young's works have evolved from a more formal and objective standpoint in previous work, physically changing the space to get a certain frame, creating a structure and framework for the images to a more subjective approach in *drei*. Here he becomes involved with an already present symmetry of place and focuses on the development of a more personal narrative through impersonal settings to engage with his own self confrontation.

In *drei* we are looking at images which render the reality of appearance as well as the appearance of reality, acknowledging that the camera can simultaneously lie astonishingly well and scrutinise reality down to its pores. Whether the images are fact or fiction in themselves becomes almost irrelevant as we are gently guided into a narrative that is ultimately a reflection of our own personal truths and myths.