Preserving the Image

The recent work of Simon Kennedy The Preserved (2-26th November 2011)

What one first notices when encountering New Zealand born artist Simon Kennedy’s recent body of works is their impressive material presence – they seem to exude an eerie, almost ghostly authority about a time past. The Sydney based artist’s recent exhibition, The Preserved (2-26th November 2011) at Gallery 9, comprised two groupings of images taken from found black and white photographs - one large scale carbon pencil portraits on paper of anonymous female WWII French expat spies. These bold, and somewhat exotic, creatures emanate a reserved energy that could almost suggest movement or attack. The second, a charcoal portrait of the infamous American taxidermist Carl Akeley (1864-1926) accompanied by smaller oil paintings reminiscent of vintage picture books, of the animals he hunted and then later became famous for protecting. Kennedy’s painting and drawing practice have evolved in recent years to incorporate a photorealist aesthetic - combining exquisite draftsmanship, a limited palette of muted tones, theatrical interplay of light and shadow, soft smoky charcoal and oils, and a wonderfully imaginative, and humorous, engagement with historical imagery. The Preserved clearly raises questions about the memorial act of photography as a medium that actively encourages nostalgia, and also the construction of the image itself.

As well as the visual impact of The Preserved that so effectively illustrates that ‘a photograph is both a pseudo presence and a token of absence’, what is fascinating about Kennedy’s approach is his broader conceptual use of found photographs. While his singular image choices are for aesthetic reasons, they are enveloped by enthralling histories that, importantly, Kennedy only hints at so as to draw on the rich creative landscape found photographs offer. As Susan Sontag wrote about the subject in her seminal book On Photography they are only a ‘fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to photographs)’. And Kennedy does just this – the stylized and emotive portraits of the female spies are reinstated alongside the sinister picture of Ackley, aptly titled The Preserver (2011), and his entourage of animals, such as Rabbit (2011) and Zebra (2011) which have been preserved, displayed and documented on multiple levels. Such linkages reiterate in a
macabre and humorous way photography’s, and images in general, roles within processes of cultural preservation, classification and collections. Similarly, Kennedy’s unusual choice of grainy carbon pencil on paper for the female portraits on such a scale vi recalls the materiality of the photograph that ultimately turns the past into a collectable and consumable object vii. There are also other more direct links between the works themselves – the animals give the fictitious code names to the female spies such as The Rabbit (2011) and Agent Zebra (2011) which also emphasises the ambiguity of the women’s identities and, one could argue, aligns the heroic spy with the brave wild beast. While the painting titled Leopard (2011) is the actual creature that attacked Akeley - the scratches just being visible on his cheek. Such anecdotal games are characteristic of the intelligent, dark humour at play in Kennedy’s oeuvre and the childhood imagination, personal memories and ongoing research of the era that the artist’s ideas stem from.

Returning to the aesthetics of Kennedy’s work, one can’t but help recall the portraits of Gerhard Richter which were not depictions of people but of images themselves as a ‘discovery of something pictorial that is extracted from the representational itself. For all his skepticism surrounding the cognitive capacity of the image, he stands by it and extends the chain of images viii. Kennedy also extracts this pictorial ‘essence’ by his sensitive and informed material translation, and obvious appreciation of historical photographic images and continuation of this visual cycle. Yet, his aesthetic belies a similar enthusiasm and distrust - the dramatic scale, materials, visible mark making, referencing of pictorial seriality and the often challenging gaze of his subjects – make the viewer aware, even self conscious of, the constructed nature of the image. And like Richter, reminds us, however passive, images are always authored and open to reinterpretation and this is their inherent cultural aggression and wonder.
Carl Akeley was the ‘father of taxidermy’ and was recognized for his contributions to American museums, particularly The Field Museum of Natural History and The American Museum of Natural History where The Akeley Hall of African Mammals. He became an advocate for protecting gorillas and also he improved the motion picture camera for wildlife based films.

Kennedy uncovers the photographs online and in library reference books.

Much of Kennedy’s research is done after the image is chosen.


The drawings of the female spies measure 91 x 114cm.