

Interview with Ben Burbridge, 2010

Aspects of the occult have featured prominently in your work for several years now. What first drew you to these kinds of subject matter?

A lot of my earlier work focussed on particular groups who had their own codes and methodologies, such as trainspotters and Morris dancers. I positioned myself often on the periphery of these groups, as both participant and observer, often adopting a role that was an assimilation of a member of their group. It seemed like a natural progression to focus more clearly on groups of a more occult or esoteric nature, such as witches, clairvoyants and shaman, as it put my peripheral position (as someone who could adopt a set of beliefs, even on a fleeting or temporary basis) more clearly into focus.

On a more general level, I think that the process of making art and the process of exploring the inexplicable (as some occult practices do, such as spiritualism) are similarly tied up in a seemingly never-ending quest to uncover 'truths', both operating in an intriguingly murky place where nothing can ever be fully resolved or proven. Similarly the process of making and viewing art could be seen as a magical one, in which objects, images and ideas become transformed in some way, largely through the mutual belief of the artist and viewer. So I suppose there is the notion of me as an artist adopting the role of believer, or initiate, and the conundrum of what happens when these different (albeit similar) roles get mixed up.

What were you setting out to do in making the stereoscopic photographs (that you exhibited at The Photographers' Gallery)?

I am partly interested in stereoscopic photography as it is a largely obsolete medium, and a prism through which some of the themes that are central to my practice, such as magic, belief and immersion, are explored.

Stereoscopes have the potential to be magical – partly through their historical association, and the awe that they inspired pre-cinema. There is therefore a notion of magic that is tied up with these photographs, a suggestion that a transformation has taken place (a 2D image is transformed into a 3D one; similarly with my later use of a magic lantern, a static image is transformed into a moving one).

Importantly, with the stereoscopic camera, viewer and photograph, we can see, more or less, how they work. There is a paradox: the revealing of the process somehow increases a sense of wonder. Conversely, I have no idea how a computer works, and it therefore has no sense of magic.

The 3D stereoscopic photographs encapsulate a dichotomy in the work: the viewer is simultaneously aware of a construction yet also deluded that

experience is real, compliantly entering another world (a suspension of disbelief takes place).

How, in very practical terms, did you make the photographs?

The photographs were taken either with a Russian Sputnik medium format 3D camera, or with an American Stereo Realist 35mm 3D camera. Both date from c. 1950s. The medium format photos were shown on a variety of mostly antique viewers, dating from the 19th century. The 35mm photos were shown in Stereo Realist viewers, dating from the 50s.

In the images with an object that appears to be floating, I put the object on the end of a long stick, and then photographed the model and the object so that the object hid the stick from view (if that makes sense!). It seemed important to use a hands-on type of special effect instead of Photoshop, as it tied in more closely with techniques used in Victorian spirit photography, and somehow seemed like a more interesting kind of trickery.

Are there particular moments in photographic history, or recent photographic practice, that this work references or responds to?

The images themselves reference 19th century spirit photography. Although the practice of attempting to photograph supernatural phenomena has of course continued to the present.

Why were you drawn to these?

Photography was the perfect medium to try and capture spirits in the 19th century - photography supposedly offered absolute proof that something existed. Photography and spiritualism emerged at the same time - initially at least part of the nineteenth century's merging of science and religion, of the empirical and the unprovable. They were produced at a time when photography was in its infancy - people still believed that it represented empirical proof that an event had taken place. From our perspective, in an era when any image can be and is manipulated, spirit photographs are laughably fake - yet interesting as they describe an absolute belief in something. They are an attempt to make visible the invisible.

What do you think is the nature of your engagement with these other photographic practices? How or where does your work position itself in relation to them?

They are not an attempt to consciously recreate or reenact spirit photography, although of course they adopt some of their language and even directly use some of the equipment associated with the era, such as the 19th century viewers. I am interested, with both stereoscopic and spirit photography (whether from the

19th century or later), in the possibility of the viewer entering another world, no matter how fantastical and unlikely, and believing in it. Stereoscopes force you to believe you are looking at a 3D world, and spirit photographs, especially from a historical perspective, seem to offer some kind of absolute proof in the supernatural.

How did you choose your titles? What is their significance to the photographs?

The titles arose simply from what the images suggested to me. Some of them have quite direct links to some of the above-mentioned notions of belief, such as *A Fraction of the Truth*, and *A Near Misunderstanding*. Others might suggest a coming together of two worlds, such as *Sequential Opposition* or *Understated Collision*. As mentioned above, a lot of my work has explored the notion of occupying different positions simultaneously, such as participant/observer and believer/skeptic.

How do you feel the photographs relate to the rest of your practice, particularly your subsequent performance-based works?

There are some direct, quite formal connections with media, such as my recent use of a Victorian magic lantern projector. Hopefully notions of belief and immersion are continued in the performance-based works, such as my encounter with a shaman (*The Symbol*) and a group of amateur clairvoyants (*Close To You*), as well as my more recent performances, which use actors to assimilate a group who come together over the course of the performance through a common voice (*Concerning the Difference*).

Ideally, in both the 3D photographs and the performances, I would like the viewer / audience to feel they are part of (either witnessing or more directly participating in) an exclusive experience that has an allure and still commands our respect, in part due to its marginalized, ostracised nature.

Who do you make your work for? Do you feel this is something you can determine as an artist?

I make work for whoever happens to be there, which is largely an art audience, but there has often been a diverse range of people in the audience. An aspect of my practice incorporates a diverse range of communities and I am interested in the notion of adopting multiple positions in relation to these groups (such as believer and non-believer). For example, my performance *Presence* (2008), for which I invited two psychics to give a demonstration of clairvoyance and stage a séance for an audience that was a combination of a more traditional art audience and people who were interested in, or believed in, clairvoyance. Similarly, for *Close to You* (2008) I attempted to demonstrate clairvoyance to a group of trainee psychics, again incorporating a non-art audience. Next year I will be

doing something for the Pagan Federation, which will be for an almost entirely non-art audience. So yes, I think it is possible to determine who sees it, but this only makes sense if it somehow links to themes that are central to the practice.