

Authentic Fakes

Julian Stallabrass surveys the mythical landscapes of **Cindy Bernard** and **John Kippin**



.....
Cindy Bernard
Ask the Dust: Vertigo
 (1957-1990)
 1990

Two apparently diverse national myths of land and people are explored in recent photographic exhibitions by Cindy Bernard and John Kippin. Anyone who, wanting to replay Harry Lime, has made the little pilgrimage through Vienna to the giant ferris wheel will appreciate Cindy Bernard's endeavours.

She travels to the locations of celebrated American movies to rephotograph the sites, so far as possible as they were originally seen and in the film's original format. The result is a series of pictures called *Ask the Dust* which is dominated by archetypal American images: mesas, deserts, roads running dead straight to the horizon. Although sometimes we are reminded of specific scenes (as in the dried-up river bed from *Chinatown*), Bernard does not generally fix on the idiosyncratic, so the pictures are often just vaguely familiar, inflected with the atmosphere of 100 half-

forgotten movies. In this sense only, the pictures rely on the same effect as Cindy Sherman's film stills, but here the land rather than the artist 'adopts' a stereotypical character.

Turning to England, John Kippin's large, very high quality colour prints also take the land and imbue it with personality, frequently referring to national myths and the heritage industry. Some of the photographs bear words printed across them, like advertising slogans, inviting the viewer to tease out the solution to some puzzle. So the derelict fuselage of a



HIDDEN

NATIONAL PARK NORTHUMBERLAND

jet fighter which has been used for target practice, and which lies forlornly on a moor under a heavy sky, has the word 'Hidden' inscribed below it; the fighter is in plain view, so the viewer is alerted to some other, concealed significance. Even where the meaning is plain enough, as in *Forgotten* where the supporting walls of a coke works stand in their own patch of sunlight among heaps of rubble, the words transform the image. Since they are printed directly across the photographs, they seem part of it, the resultant combination rising up like an apparition. Like advertisements, they are visions to be read, but absolutely unlike advertisements, they bear the stamp of truth.

The work of both photographers seems haunted; in Kippin the archaeological sites of former industry are like graveyards and representations of their former inhabitants loom above the real figures of the present. These presences, visible or implied, are the ghosts of ordinary people, perhaps of an 'authentic' working class, or communities, or a set of older values, now recast as mere image; here photography is surely trying to make amends for its complicity in the process by which representation is used to banish the real. Large format photographs require a slow shutter speed if foreground and background are to be kept sharp, so moving people are often dissolved by blurring, while the static objects about them retain their solidity. It is as though the objects are rocks, the people mere flotsam washed about them. In one picture taken in Sheffield, steelworkers cast in bronze are set

The work of both photographers seems haunted; in Kippin the archaeological sites of former industry are like graveyards and representations of their former inhabitants loom above the real figures of the present.

down amidst shoppers in a mall; in another called *City of Ghosts*, a giant depiction of some long-dead or generic worker takes on a more resistant solidity than the high-street shoppers passing below him.

Bernard's ghosts are absences which leave the images dislocated, as though the focus of attention were misplaced, fixing on something that had long since passed away. Often what looks like it should be the main subject appears in shadow or way off centre, or there is a blankness about the images which reinforces their status as backdrops. Bernard's photography is subject to a strict system. In *Ask the Dust* she has taken one film a year for the period 1954 to 1974; from, as she has it, the beginning of desegregation in American schools to the resignation of Nixon, and from *The Searchers* to *Chinatown*. The actors often played heroes, founders of the American West (now most often seen in jeans adverts) so the series could be read as the story of great opportunity, of political advances now being rolled back, of political decline and the loss of the American dream, for

.....
John Kippin
 (Hidden) National Park
 Northumberland
 1991



NOSTALGIA FOR THE FUTURE

John Kippin
Nostalgia for the Future
 1988

which the empty landscapes may stand as a register.

When the land serves as a locus for national identity, its forms imbued with the very essence of what it is to be English or American, then it is easy to see how this identification can be turned against itself. Bernard's project is self-proclaimedly postmodern, reliant on the rule of the simulacrum. Among the texts accompanying the exhibition, there appears a passage from Baudrillard's book, *America*:

It is useless to seek to strip the desert of its cinematic aspects in order to restore its original essence; those features are thoroughly superimposed upon it and will not go away. The cinema has absorbed everything – Indians, mesas, canyons, skies. [...] the only natural spectacle that is really gripping is the one that offers the most profundity *and at the same time the total simulacrum of that profundity*. [...] Monument Valley is the geology of the earth, the mausoleum of the Indians, and the camera of John Ford. It is erosion and extermination, but it is also the tracking shot, the movies.¹

Given the current context of lethal American conservatism and patriotic pride, this project of merely framing myths may seem radical. Furthermore, Baudrillard's wrapping of genocide and tracking shots into the same sentence as though they were somehow equivalent is comforting to the artist who can believe that their liberal interventions, however

nuanced, are as effective as, say, the systematic slaughter of Indians or buffalo.

While restoring the desert to nature may be a chimera, there is plenty to be found in these actual landscapes which slips outside the mainstream production of simulacra. Richard Misrach's *Desert Cantos*, for instance, include extraordinary photographs of pits where animal corpses are dumped and of military test sites; and there is Carole Gallagher's work interviewing and photographing the irradiated victims of nuclear tests, or her pictures of the animal pens which surrounded so many 'ground zeros' used to confine the experimental subjects exposed to nuclear blasts.² By contrast, rephotographing the sites of myth-making films may open their contents to a little irony, but to what end? Bernard's blank agnosticism in front of the subject, a play on photography's objectivity, is as though she means to say that meaning is not her responsibility. We may want to take different attitudes to the messages of 'classic' Westerns and films like *Five Easy Pieces* or even *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which have complex things to say about, say, the collision of heroism and commerce, but here they all receive the same treatment.

Yet Bernard realises that through films and other media these landscapes are thoroughly entangled with ideological positions, with clichés and dreams. Furthermore, there is something in these pictures

which photography is particularly well suited to present: in the wildernesses there is the presence of that which continues without human presence, at a glacially slow pace, and against which all our readings are contingent. And among human habitation, there are all the changes wrought by time passing and made explicit in Bernard's double dating of the pictures. So in *Dirty Harry* (1971/1990) there is the sniper's view from a parapet over a rooftop swimming pool, now surrounded by satellite dishes, the pool's bottom advertising the Holiday Inn to air travellers.

By contrast, Kippin does actively poke behind myth's facade, by depicting factory ruins and the militarised landscape, or simply by juxtaposing leisure areas with a wheezing industry, or historical relics and the constructions of the heritage business. One thing that is 'hidden', then, and revealed here is the extent of the militarisation of the economy. In many cases, glorious high colour images are spoilt by some troublesome juxtaposition or by the sense that something has been misplaced: in one apparently idyllic scene a girl and an older woman are fishing by a lake accompanied by a dog lying in the sun, but they are spied upon from the background by a security camera.

Some of Kippin's sharpest comments are directed against the rapid assimilation of industrial decline to the clichéd imagery of national heritage. Such stereotyping of the recent past has serious consequences. If the case of the Consett steelworkers summoned out of the air by our Chancellor's economic fancy was shocking, this was not because he had mistaken the name of one town for another, but because something that had been felt so painfully in Consett, and could never so quickly slip the memory, was simply a matter of another economic adjustment for those who make such decisions; that workers are simply interchangeable parts, to be swapped in and out, and that once out, they ceased to be people so soon, but were recast as cloth-capped stereotypes in bronze or brick.

Kippin's vision of an England where time is out of joint can be compared to Bill Brandt's famous book, *The English at Home*, where the state of the nation was assessed through archetypal images of the races, cricket and boys at Eton seen alongside harrowing pictures of industrial poor.³ Both these sets of images have now passed into the oblivion of stereotypes fostered by the heritage industry. A similar point may be made about Bernard's rephotographing of scenes already photographed (a reminder of Sherrie Levine of course), and which often seem to refer to the American tradition in photography. Her scene of a bank building from *Bonnie and Clyde* looks a little like something out of Walker Evans; this is because we still see such scenes through his eyes, as did the film makers. If there is a danger in such images that the elements of critique are eventually turned into an identifying stereotype, Kippin is well aware of it: in *Nostalgia for the Future* a rusting ship is beached behind a lonely caravan. Between the two a small group of people stand observing the hulk. This picture suggests both how industry has become rehabilitated for the tourist

both sets of photographs have more in common than might at first be imagined, if only because England and the United States are bound by so much – by their militarised economies and by the role of global sheriff and deputy

industry and something of the poor and rootless existence that is being foisted upon people by various economic 'miracles'. Nostalgia is cultivated for a clean and orderly future which is both very old and forever out of reach.

One of Kippin's photographs shows a reconstruction of the Cutty Sark and is sarcastically labelled 'Authentic Reproduction'. This oxymoron applies nicely to Bernard's *Ask the Dust* series, which is exactly that, to Kippin's work, which strives for an authentic presentation of actual fakery, and to the traditional claims of photography as a whole. Both Bernard and Kippin comment upon their subjects and their media together and both make wistful or mournful *memento mori* images of past ideals, real or imagined. As such, these works become precious objects, which must be conserved in fixity, while about them, 'all that is solid melts into air'.

The content, too, of both sets of photographs have more in common than might at first be imagined, if only because England and the United States are bound by so much – by their militarised economies and by the role of global sheriff and deputy – the latter an honorary role bestowed upon the smaller country as the reins of world governance passed from one to the other. Bernard may cause us to reflect on national myths; we can read the ghosts of heroes and victims, real or imagined, into the empty spaces of her landscapes, while in often crepuscular conditions, which may be sunsets, she shows us reminders of the United States' reflections on itself at a time when the hope of breaking with the prevailing habits of oppression was raised and then abandoned. In the fine detail of Kippin's prints there is a more forthright critique of myth making and its mundane context; of a society which has no qualms about remaking its past, however terrible, into marketable entertainment for today's shoppers. ■

1. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner, London, 1988, pp. 69-70.

2. See Richard Misrach, *Violent Legacies. Three Cantos*, Manchester, 1992, and Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero. The Secret Nuclear War*, Cambridge, Mass., 1993.

3. Bill Brandt, *The English at Home*, London, 1936.

Cindy Bernard was at the **James Hockey Gallery** SIAD Farnham until May 27, and will be at the **Viewpoint Photography Gallery** Salford August 10 to September 10. **John Kippin** 'Nostalgia for the Future. Photographs 1988-1994' was at **The Photographers' Gallery** London until May 13.

Julian Stallabrass is a London-based critic and art historian.