

**Passage:
Photographic
works from
China**

Kaye Shumack and Simone Douglas

Interview by Melissa Chiu, October 1998

MC: *Both of you have utilised photography as a substantial component of your art practice, but in very different ways. Can you give some comment on your individual approaches to working with the medium?*

KS: Much of my photographic work has been concerned with the image as a mediated representation of social and cultural concerns. Drawing references from advertising and film theory, my work has taken up issues of the gaze, sexuality and desire, which are embedded within the image as media text. More recently, I've been involved in photodocumentary projects, which explore the notion of the photograph as a fragment of the real.

SD: The potential for ambiguity is the basis of my interest and conceptual relationship to photography. For example, in 'Aberrations', I used fragmented images of the body to create a tension between the assumed physical reality of the observer and a represented body. I combined these images with abstracted images representing recollected memory or experience. By putting these images together, I aim to suggest the combined states of body and mind which form a perception of the world. At the point where a subject becomes something other than itself, where the form becomes uncertain.

KS: I'm interested in the shifts that can take place in constructing a photographic image and how it reflects a sense of the real, yet allows many possibilities of interpretation.

SD: Yes, in a way I think it could be likened to a peripheral glance. Something that when you look at directly is no longer there. It's a similar experience to when you lie on the ground looking out into the stars when you're young, and you think that if maybe you can let go of the idea of gravity then you can fall away from the earth. But you wonder whether it's possible to suspend your belief in the gravity that holds you there. That to me, is essentially what photography is about and that if you can somehow suspend that belief, it can be transformed into something else.

I'm interested in using this structure to suggest what possibilities are left within a constructed image, by making visible the slip between the recognisable and the abstract - the unknowable.

MC: *Kaye you've spoken before about a cinematic approach to your work and in particular, the ideas expressed by Bresson. He outlines two ways of looking at cinema, the first describes those who employ theatre and use the camera to reproduce. The second is to use the camera to create. Which approach would you identify as more significant to your art practice?*

KS: I think the influence of Bresson with my work in 'Passage' is based in representation. This evidences a shift in my work away from the idea of staging which revolved around a construction of artifice. Many of the photographs that I've exhibited are theatrical and highly charged, often based on a particular film director's work.

For example, I did a whole series of works referencing the films of Jean Luc Godard titled 'That Godard Thing'. It explored his concerns with the urban as artificial and unpredictable urban landscapes. I shot this work around Sydney Central locations. Carefully 'on the run' from one location to the next, I'd staged the shots around a loose narrative of character interaction and shift.

The unstaged quality of my China work is a different approach for me but it's still very much based on the same sorts of conventions that I've been working with for a very long time. These conventions are related to the dimension of film and fiction. It's a preoccupation with painting and interest in film that forms my visual perspective.

MC: *How do you view the relationship between photography and film? Quite obviously photography cannot be interpreted simply as a static version of film.*

KS: The most basic explanation for this is that any film is a complex fiction, and that an image narrative, whether it's a linear narrative or not, is a fiction within a specific time and place. With photography you can set up the real and fiction in a very immersing way.

SD: Film's also been a major influence on my work, mainly through filmmakers such as Tarkosky, whose films are quite unstructured -despite the fact that there exists a strong narrative. I was interested in the collision of these two elements: abstraction and narrative.

KS: I've been influenced by the work of photographer Nan Golding, whose practice references ideas of the snapshot with many related images within one exhibition context. Seeing her exhibitions, I often think about two or three key images which seem to work as links, and it's as if the others provide a context for these more defining images. I often work with multiple images in this way. A lot of the time the some of the photographs I place in a group of works aren't as strong as others, but I can't let them go because they're crucial to the overall picture. This technique's also drawn from film. Parts of a film are there just to pave the way for the plot development. I would be interested in doing a project that locates these moments.

MC: *Simone, how do you go about the initiation of a body of work?*

SD: I usually start with an idea like 'aberration' or 'uncertain exchange'- or in this case 'passage'- and from that the idea will unfold. I sometimes use images that I've had a number of years that have taken time to reveal themselves. I'm also influenced by writers since the ideas for my works begin as words.

MC: *By this, do you mean you select a word and then complete the work around it?*

SD: 'Passage' definitely developed from the word first. I'm reluctant to title works because the title's only meant to act as an entry point to the work. Titles are intended to be fluid. This is why in many ways, I enjoy poetry. The photographs

I create are not meant to be of anything specific. As in a poem, there should be enough to suggest other things.

In 'An Uncertain Exchange' light fields disrupt photographic knowledge - the image slips from the field of vision. It's known but unexplained. A transient state, dark and indistinct.

MC: *What sort of impact has your visit to China had on your work?*

KS: The title 'Passage' relates to my work as a very descriptive term which plays off the 'real', represented by images such as people travelling with their bags. There's a sense these images record a moment or a journey. The title also works well because I feel that my work tunes into a personal journey of travelling through a very different culture. While in China I had a strong sense of a way of being or existing in a different kind of space. In my work, I wanted to suggest this very personal sense of public space in China.

Again, the photographs should be open to interpretation. In most of the images, people are shown carrying things with a sense of care. These objects have a loved quality lending a sense of tenderness to the work.

SD: What struck me was the difference in conception of space. In Australia the sense of the landscape has always been a strong influence in my work. In the areas that we stayed in China what fascinated me was these noticeably different articulations of space as a series of layers - between the architecture and the people, the buildings themselves and the surrounds and so on. Some of the works in 'Passage'

use the edge of the photograph itself as the rupture between surrounding space and form. This use of the 'frame' forces the play of structure within space, like the enclosure of the calligraphic brush mark on the paper.

MC: *So it was a specific juncture that you wanted to convey?*

SD: Yes, I wanted to show this. I attended a calligraphy class and what amazed me was the theoretical underpinning of the practice. The mark on the paper was about enclosure, with no trace of where you entered or exited the work. This struck a chord with what I was trying to achieve in my own work, acknowledging something of my previous concerns with form, the mark, the trace, the stain - the uncertainty of coming and going.

KS: The whole idea of the exhibition, showing work by Simone and myself, acknowledges different approaches which can inform one another in an evocative way.

SD: I find it really interesting because the work in "Passage" establishes a relationship or dialogue between two personal readings. For me it's only the beginning in terms of the influence of this trip to China on my work. The full ramifications will be played out over the next five years or so. It will become more and more refined over time. Both our works are very much about seeing something from a different perspective.

Kaye Shumack is a Sydney-based artist who has been exhibiting photographic works since 1991 in both solo and group exhibitions. Her work was exhibited in *Photography is Dead! Long Live Photography!* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996, *Don't Leave Me This Way - Art in the Age of Aids* at the National Gallery of Australia in 1997, *Queer Crossings* in 1997 at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts and in *Every (Other) Day* at First Draft Gallery 1998. Solo exhibitions include *Hard Ground* shown at First Draft Gallery in 1996 and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne in 1997, and *Queer Zone Project* at Artspace Gallery and Casula Powerhouse, 1998.

Kaye is a senior lecturer at the School of Design, UWS Nepean. In 1997 she spent several months studying and teaching at the China National Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, PRC.

Simone Douglas is a Sydney-based artist represented by Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London since 1994 with her exhibition *An Uncertain Exchange*. She is currently a director of First Draft Gallery where she recently exhibited and curated a group exhibition *Every (Other) Day* for the satellite Biennale program. Her work was exhibited in *Photography is Dead! Long Live Photography!* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996, and in the Biennial of Paris in 1996. Her 1994 exhibition in London at the Photographers Gallery, *Aberrations* was followed by *Recent Acquisitions* at the Victoria & Albert Museum; and *A Portrait of My Mother*, exhibited at the Edinburgh Arts Festival, London, Paris 1994-6 and New York 1997.

Simone lectures in photomedia at a range of institutions, including The College of Fine Arts, Sydney College of the Arts and The Australian Centre of Photography. She spent time in China in 1997.