

*After Desire* by Joanna Lowry



Image: Noora Pelkonen, from *Karelia* (2015)

‘We don’t really want what we think we desire’ (i) says Slavoj Žižek, explaining Lacan’s contribution to our understanding of the tragedy of the human condition. If we were given what we wanted, we would only want something else. To be alive is to be always in a state of longing. We desire what we cannot have.

But what is it that we want from photographs? And what do they seem to want of us? There is no doubt that the photograph itself, and all the processes involved in its imagining and its production, is an elusive and incalculable object: on the one hand it is an image seemingly produced by the world and in an important sense touching the world, yet it also mimics that world, and screens us from it. The photograph stands in front of the real whilst simultaneously promising us some privileged access to it. This, as Žižek pointed out, is also the structure of desire: a longing that is always displaced, deferred, and never realized. The photograph is a space in which we skirt the possibilities of moving beyond the sign, through the tear in the curtain, glimpsing, but never attaining ‘the real’ behind the screen.

Many years ago Geoffrey Batchen named his book about the origins of photography *Burning with Desire*.(ii) In it he traced the histories of those various extraordinary individuals who were involved in the pre-history of photography. He argued that in order to be invented photography had first to be imagined and desired, and that that desire – to seize the world, fix the image, stop time – was historically specific. He suggested that the structure of that desire, with all its ontological complexity, all the fundamental questions it raised about our relationship to the world, to the peculiarity of time, and to the vexed problem of how meaning could seem to arise out of the world, was still central to the structure of what we conceive photography to be today. Whatever the social uses photography is put to, whatever the technological innovations that might stretch our understanding of the word, this complexity still represents the defining essence of the photographic.

It is perhaps then not surprising that the work in this exhibition, so diverse in the kinds of strategies deployed and topics explored, should all, at a deeper level, also pose questions about the operations of desire. Underpinning each of these practices is a longing for photography to offer more and to take us to another place, and each of these practices is also haunted by the knowledge that this is an impossible demand. The creativity happens in the space between this promise and its inevitable failure.

In its most obvious form this is represented in the work by Giola Cassar and James Murray, both of them using photography to explore the idea of the lover. In Cassar’s work the lover is a fiction, an imaginary composite of all the men who have left her, and the work is an act of obsessive recollection, restaging the romance in a set of rough Instax prints, imagining his body in a set of large format close-ups of skin and surface, archiving the objects he might have left behind. Murray’s lover is more real, but also just as unreachable. Murray seeks to capture his beauty but that beauty is an unrealizable ideal, and he presents us instead with a continuous reflection on the process of making the work, a meditation on photography as a kind of touching, casting, moulding, that will always represent something other and unattainable that has been displaced and set aside.

Noora Pelkonen, Linn Kuhlmann and Rachel Maloney also use photography to explore a condition of loss, but here it is the loss of place that is being explored, those places that haunt our imagination that we can never properly return to. Pelkonen explores Karelia – an area of Finland partitioned off by the USSR after the Second World War, and now existing in the memories and imagination of displaced evacuees. These pictures really do represent a place that can never be returned to. Rachel Maloney’s lost places exist in childhood memory and in the collective memories formed by literature and storytelling. Linn Kuhlmann takes as her starting point Thomas Mann’s great novel *The Magic Mountain*, and takes us on a journey to a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps, a place which is both the subject of that book, but also of course is not: a place which forever eludes the stories told about it and which, in her images, reveals an unsettling presence of its own.

Charlotte Lambert-Gorwyn and Patty Rentschler both present us with rooms drenched in colour. Lambert-Gorwyn’s bohemian squatters create fabulous environments that mask the conditions of their own economic fragility, and Rentschler’s vivid images of desolate loneliness mask the condition of depression through a palette of brilliant melodramatic colour. Desire in these works is embodied in the very language of colour and texture and tactility. It is as though photography itself might offer a kind of resolution of the longing for a life more complete. That promise is offered in a more abstract way by Nigel Tribbeck’s huge abstract colour fields. Here the promise of the photographic

image is realized at the level of the print. Each picture offers us a luminous field of colour that we might drop into and lose ourselves in. This ultimate loss of self in front of the image is obviously situated at the very threshold of desire – a threshold at which we are offered a place beyond the image, behind the Lacanian screen.

In a very different register Kirsty Thomas retreats to the black-and-white darkroom, carefully and obsessively printing and reprinting delicate pictures of vases of flowers. Stitched and sewn and knotted together, these strange uncanny objects seem to have life and volition of their own. If we touch the photographs perhaps we can access something of the fragility of that secret world... And secret worlds are, of course, central to Seán Padraic Birnie's practice, an exploration of haunted spaces and of the haunting of the image itself: an archive of haunted rooms and buildings, a series of images from *The Shining* depicting scenes of haunting that have been slowed down to reveal the complicity of the technology itself in the search for the other, and a separate book exploring the parallels between the darkroom and the psychic's parlour.

Photography in these works is many things – it is archive, index, trace, colour, memory, metaphor and fantasy. It is often process and it is, more fundamentally, always an engagement with a technology. But I would argue that these artists use that technology to entice us into an engagement with desire, with the promise of something that we think we want from the picture, though we are not sure what it is, and though it may always finally elude us. Photography perhaps can only really happen after desire.

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i Slavoj Žižek 'Jacques Lacan- Fantasy Theory – Objects of Desire' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nd0LGi7js8g>

ii Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London England, 1997