

'Co-operative Society.'

Exhibition dates: 8 July – 3 September

Preview: Thursday 7 July 6:00 – 8:00pm

Julian Germain, Patricia Azevedo, Murilo Godoy, and street children from Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Julian Germain, Patricia Azevedo, and Murilo Godoy are photographers based respectively in the UK and Brazil whose shared interests in their medium have led them to collaborate on joint projects. The three have, for the last two decades, developed their research into 'found' photography and the medium's vernacular uses. Rather than concentrating upon producing 'fine prints', the artists enjoy finding powerful photographic imagery where it is least expected. As well as exhibiting, reworking and publishing 'found' photography, as Germain has noted, "we have moved from collecting photographs to 'making photography happen'." In this sense, the photographers are more facilitators than 'auteurs', allowing others to 'play' with the medium in controlled experiments which have yielded some astonishing results.

The photographers' project 'The Beautiful Horizon', exhibited in 'Co-operative Society', is one such example. The project is a highly unusual instance of co-operation. It is a collaboration between three artists separated by continents, and between the artists and fifty 'amateur' photographers. The latter were fifty street children, provided with cameras by the artists to document their own lives. From 1995, Azevedo, Godoy and Germain began approaching groups of street children who live in the streets and favelas of Belo Horizonte, Brazil's third largest city. Azevedo, Godoy and Germain's project took an unorthodox approach. Rather than attempting to create an ethnographic portrait of a group, they would provide the children with cameras and film to record their own lives, in the anticipation that their images would, despite their lack of training, reveal something which they, as professional photographers, could not. The artists observed that the children's lives are chaotic and dangerous. Many operate as an involuntary 'collective' forced together by circumstances, though. Unlike other co-operative organisations, the kids associate out of necessity – simply to survive.

Such an enterprise is, of course, fraught with difficulties, whether practical (will the cameras be returned?); ideological (is such a project exploitative or emancipatory?); and artistic (will the images be powerful, and if so, how?) The artists' faith in the creative potential of the kids is of necessity, absolute: the sole source of authority in 'The Beautiful Horizon' is the potency and power of the images themselves. Many of the existing photographic representations of Brazil's

'Co-operative Society.'

Exhibition dates: 8 July – 3 September

Preview: Thursday 7 July 6:00 – 8:00pm

underclass have either aestheticised the enormity of their problems (such as the film 'City of God'), or simply offered pity. 'The Beautiful Horizon' is the children's own unvarnished story. Germain and Azevedo, whose relationship is founded on photography, eventually found that they were able to take pictures with and of the children, using the same basic cameras. Accordingly, included in 'The Beautiful Horizon' are several of their own pictures, though no distinction is made.

The children in the photographs are between the ages of 12 and 17. Living on the streets or in the most temporary sort of accommodation, few have ever been taught to read. Most make a living through their wits or social networks. Often, the children live above the law, or are involved with drugs. Their constant fear of the police is clear in an image of police officers. It is, as Germain notes, "ominous and menacing". Deprived of their individuality by the photographer's hand, the policemen are reduced to featureless figures in quasimilitary jackboots and guns.

Though we could hardly see the pictures as a celebration of a way of life, the results offer us a panoramic spectrum of emotions. We encounter tenderness and intimacy, brimming sexuality and violence. As Germain has remarked, the photographs speak about the kids' "pride and confidence in their physicality and sexuality; the sometimes loving and sometimes violent nature of their relationships; the routine abuse of solvents; fear of the police; and even allusions to their dreams and fantasies." It can take a few seconds to register how playfulness and pathos intersect in certain images. And if sometimes the images do not initially convey the vulnerability of the children's lives, it is sobering to be told that many have died or disappeared since taking the photographs.

The picture reproduced here, of a girl known as Heidi, might initially seem disarmingly straightforward. Yet as Germain says "there is a peaceful, almost serene atmosphere". We begin to recognise that Heidi's contemplative expression and pose, and pale pink costume resemble the pregnant Virgin Mary. Her surroundings become to resemble a stable. Having begun to notice the poignancy of such details, we then become aware of the casual artistry of the image's construction. For reasons we can only guess at, and in complete incongruity to her makeshift surroundings, Heidi stands beneath a reproduction of one of the greatest portraits in the Western canon –

'Co-operative Society.'

Exhibition dates: 8 July – 3 September

Preview: Thursday 7 July 6:00 – 8:00pm

Francisco de Goya's 'Francisca Sabasa y Garcia', now in the National Gallery in Washington DC. In the photograph, the expected roles of aristocrat and artisan are reversed. Whilst Heidi averts her gaze in modesty like a lady, Francisca confronts our eyes. The solemnity of Francisca's expression seems to comment on the adversities Heidi faces. Moreover, the off-beam composition pushes Heidi to the edge of the frame so that Francisca is at the centre. The composition exaggerates the feeling of instability that such a ramshackle environment conveys, too. The final detail we notice is an almost religious shaft of light. We initially imagine this to be a nocturnal scene: Heidi is in her night-dress. But a circular hole in the wall reveals that a few shabby boards separate Heidi and her baby from the danger outside. The unexpected beauty of both Goya's portrait, and the photographer's own, are by contrast, moments of beauty stolen from adversity.