

'Co-operative Society.'

Exhibition dates: 8 July – 3 September

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

John Askew

"Society is concerned to tame the photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it."
Roland Barthes, 'Camera Lucida'

John Askew's work for the last ten years has been based around an investigation of the still photographic image. As well as taking photographs, across his bodies of work Askew has made use of diverse types of 'found' images. The artist's largest and most complex project, which first brought him to public attention and remains ongoing, intertwines photographs by the artist with those predating his birth from his own family archive. As photographic historian Ian Jeffrey has written about the artist's work, such images are meditations on the relationship between the photograph and time, and are accordingly "cumulative" in effect.

Askew's work in 'Co-operative Society' continues this logic whilst making a significant departure. Here, he presents a single new work which is the culmination of a two-year developmental period. The series of works which led up to the piece illustrated, made under the collective title 'TV Pictures', have taken the form of a single image photographed from a television news report, then mirrored and repeated into a grid pattern. Often, the 'TV Pictures' have been conceived in response to particular sites and presented as photographic installations. At Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Askew has created a floor mural of some 300 ceramic tiles which entirely envelops our field of vision. Each tile is big enough to provide a wealth of detail whilst retaining an intimacy and informality. We recognise the way the image is from television reportage, though Askew has chosen close-up shots – details of human figures – which, like his other works, appear "intimate, local, and personal" as Jeffrey notes.

Laid across the floor in a grid, the work resembles a Carl Andre minimalist sculpture, albeit one subverted by a rich palette of primary colours. The play between brilliant ultramarine blues, blood reds and crisp whites also allows the work to resemble Islamic patterning and decoration. The play of glowing colours diverts us from the ostensible subject matter, so that we are inclined to see the work as an expansive constellation of images. The high key, highly saturated hues also remind us that the work is about pictures that have already been

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reproduced and mediated. In turn, Askew's project reveals itself as an examination of what photography is and is capable of.

Askew makes use of a 'documentary' aesthetic – indeed a snapshot aesthetic – so that small details reveal themselves slowly, painstakingly, and cumulatively. The juxtaposition of such an informal aesthetic, personal subject matter, and impersonal geometry serves a particular purpose. It allows us to oscillate between 'seeing into' the image and 'seeing at' it as an object, to draw Richard Wollheim's distinction. Given the potentially emotive subject matter on offer, this slowing down of our responses is crucial. Rather than immediately empathising with the human subject all too readily, we switch between taking pleasure in the colour and surface, and the pain represented on that surface. Askew's decision to present the images on ceramic tiles accentuates this process, as it heightens the images' artificially bright colours. When we 'see into' the images by examining them at close range, we are sucked into the illusion for two reasons. The surfaces of the tiles resemble the luminosity of television screens, and family-album photographs glossiness.

In fact the majority of the 'TV Pictures' series are based around images of the Middle-East, and specifically taken from coverage of the war in Iraq. Accordingly, once armed with this information we read them as interruptions into the history of war photography. The genre's most celebrated practitioners have, in the main, invited us to empathise with human beings with whom we share no common interest. Askew's use of repetition, however, undermines our ability to identify with the subjects – it defers and postpones this response rather than annulling it. By decelerating our response to photography, Askew allows us to see it for what it really is: he asks us to recognise the impossible otherness of the photographic image and respond with the incredulity and shock they deserve. Photography's first characteristic, Askew argues, is its "intractability". As he notes, "no matter how you twist and turn a photograph has something to do with revelation. It fixes a moment with a singular clarity. One hundred and sixty five years after its invention, photography remains as strong an enigma as ever." Whilst the birth of photography coincided with that of our modern understanding of the world in the Victorian period, Askew's contention is that photography's ability to take us outside the flow of time exceeds our understanding.

For Askew, photography is such a profoundly mercurial invention that it exceeds every explanation for it. Roland Barthes asserted in the

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conclusion of *Camera Lucida*, as a phenomenological enquiry into the photographic image, that society has developed two strategies for dealing with photography's irreducible strangeness. "The first consists of making photography into art, for no art is mad... the other means of taming photography is to generalize, to gregarise, to banalise it, until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can... assert its special character, its scandal, its madness." Askew's 'TV pictures' installation uses both strategies, though unlike Barthes he does not believe that photography has been tamed – rather, he believes it has merely been suppressed.