

'When I Lived in Modern Times': Archive, artefact, album.

Exhibition dates: 16 Sep – 12 Nov 2005

Preview: Thursday 15 Sep 6:00 – 8:00pm

Laura Lancaster

Laura Lancaster's recent work is based upon archives of 'found' photographs – other peoples' family albums and discarded snapshots from years and decades earlier – which she transforms into paintings. The images the artist appropriates, bought at junk shops and charity shops, or discovered in the street, enter her pictorial world by accident. Chance plays its part in the artist's work by providing her with the opportunities to revive images; she allows touristic or taboo subjects to speak afresh. As critic Moira Jeffrey has remarked, Lancaster takes "other people's orphaned images" as her starting points. As Jeffrey has also noted, uniquely amongst our personal possessions, photographs, hold a totemic power for us: "relics, mementoes, souvenirs... call them what you will, we always seem to want to drag a bit of the past around with us and force it into the present tense." As Lancaster recognises, they are the only means we truly have to imaginatively arrest or reverse the flow of time, and the one form of proof that people share the same experiences.

Lancaster's editing, selection and transformation of found images are anything but accidental, though. Working only with the images other people leave behind, her process is to reinvest 'relics' with metaphorical life. At first glance, her subjects can appear random – encompassing urban waterlands and Disneyland, jet planes and swimming pools. When seen installed in a dense hang, Lancaster's subjects are united into a form of personal mythology. The alchemical transformations of her imagination make pictorial base metal into gold. Our first observation when encountering Lancaster's work is that her dextrous handling and radiant palette allow ostensibly banal snapshots to become suffused with a poetic atmosphere. In the image of a wedding illustrated here, the very moment of a husband being able to kiss the bride – the life changing instant when holy matrimony is celebrated – is conjured with the minimum number of marks. Colours are mixed on the canvas itself, retaining a purity and grace. The paint surface has an exhilarating fluidity, as though the image had only momentarily settled into its current configuration and was about to return to liquid pigment. The brushmarks are almost all diagonal,

conveying energy and animation. The artist's feather-light touch makes the scene vividly present rather than safely historical.

Moreover, the painting appears 'romantic' in both senses. Its virtuoso technique recalls Delacroix at his most spontaneous and freewheeling, and Lancaster's subject could scarcely be more joyous, more wholesome. But her image has an alarming undertow. Extended examination makes it appear as though the couples' faces meld into one, in a science-fiction-cumhorror film. Over time we become aware that this celebration contains its opposite. Lancaster only works from discarded imagery – the wedding album from which the photograph comes was found in a junk shop, a memento from a past wilfully forgotten. It's peculiar, perhaps, that even after death or divorce someone should dispose of the few life-defining documents they have. But these oddities provide Lancaster with the opportunities to combine poignancy with humour, magic with loss. The sheer perversity of owning and working with 'second-hand' photo albums helps to create a kind of affective feedback loop in her work. Melancholy or loss are never far below the surface; her cheerful imagery and saturated palette only exaggerate and underscore the gap between our hindsight and the protagonists' hope or boisterous behaviour.

In another recent painting illustrated here, an extreme close-up portrait becomes blurry, permeable almost. A child's head, adorned with what we can only assume is make-up for a birthday party, is seen confrontationally close. The image becomes awkward, even bizarre when seen out of its original context. Here, the artist's strength is in creating a work that allows us sufficient imaginative space to reconstruct a context, but which stops short of allowing any narrative resolution. As a portrait, the painting is useless; deprived of even a proper facial identity and presented only with a 'mask', we struggle to know anything about the individual represented. Moreover, the composition is so brutally cropped that nothing can be garnered about the sitter's place in the world. Our sole point of imaginative orientation is the clown mask. Traditionally, the clown is a figure whose purpose is to bring pleasure and entertainment, but whose behaviour connotes melancholy and pathos, or even malignity and cruelty. It would be hard to imagine a figure that more accurately personifies the emotional bipolarities Lancaster's works convey.

Elsewhere in Lancaster's oeuvre, interiors, landscapes and even empty skyscapes predominate. In one of her most breathtakingly abbreviated works, a parachutist in the middle distance is brought to life as two black blobs hovering in a haze of blue. No doubt the complete abstraction of the scene echos the amateur photographer's inability to

focus and gauge lighting. In another work, an oval of mauve-grey hovers with white highlights over a dark purplish ground. The time required for the marks to coalesce and the image to become legible, for the brain to process it into matter – and the exactly specified palette – recall a late Rothko. The subject, when it finally becomes apparent is a plane window where we can see an airport runway. From radically casual brushwork, the moment prior to take-off is conjured. Lancaster's modestly sized painting offers the same experience that an abstract expressionist one does: a universal experience of the sublime, only achieved with painterly verve and a sly wit. Even here, her source materials are transformed from sentimental clichés into powerfully loaded images. From what should by rights be the most unpromising beginnings, Lancaster creates strange, irresolute icons in which contradictory emotions reside.