



KATHRYN SMITH

GOODMAN GALLERY, JOHANNESBURG

left - right

Kathryn Smith, *In Camera* (installation view), 2007, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg
 Bridget Baker, *La fille transparente à Kippel/Das transparente Mädchen in Kippel*, 2006, Lambda print and diasec
 Photo Daniel Stucki
 Bridget Baker, *The Pilot*, 2007, DVD projection (original footage b&w 16mm film), 13min
 Director
 Bridget Baker,
 Cinematographer
 Michael Cleary

Although it's not that unusual to be deeply affected by two or three particularly resonant works on a show, it is a rare occurrence to leave a gallery shaken by the total orchestrated effect of the works as a coherent body, and the unutterable strangeness of the dark spaces between them. In these instances, the transformative power of the work has a super-structural impact that is akin to the power of architecture, film or choreography. Having worked with both performance and photo-based media, Kathryn Smith is something of a formal maverick who has always exercised her freedom of choice in relation to media and technique, fiercely committed to a radical extension of conventional media in the interests of dangerous new modes of expression.

But in some instances, most notably her Standard Bank Young Artist exhibition, *Euphemism* (2004-2005), I have found that her exacting attention to form interferes with the viewer's reception of content. So struck am I by the pristine originality of the surfaces, textures and shapes her work inhabits, that I have been known to lose touch with the complex substance of her ideas, which remain trapped somewhere in the cerebral realm. Considering that the title of the show was *Euphemism*, perhaps that was part of the point, but still...

It was the absence of this dissonance, the immaculately configured relationship between medium and message that made *In Camera*, her recent solo at the Goodman Gallery, such an unequivocal triumph – although triumph is perhaps an oddly exuberant word for a show of such hauntingly sombre impact. In some ways, its spookiness recalled, *The Air is on Fire*, cult filmmaker David Lynch's recent Fondation Cartier solo, a freaky adventure into the dark psycho-sexual impulses that lurk in the mind of the creator of *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1984), *Blue Velvet* (1990) and *Lost Highway* (1999).

Entering the Goodman Gallery, I overhear an elderly lady taking a tour through the installation inquiring of curator Neil Dundas: "Is Kathryn herself pleasant or is she frightfully morbid?" Smith has successfully transformed the space into a dark encapsulated cell in which unfolds an unnerving programmed interplay of darkness and light, recalling the menacing proximity of police identification line-ups.

A form of privacy mostly offered to victims of sexual assaults and children involved in criminal cases, 'in camera' tes-

timony takes place in instances where narrating the experience of a violent crime would be too traumatic in public. Working from a range of print and online media photographs of victims and perpetrators of extremely violent acts, Smith has fashioned a series of pointillist or pixelated paintings using ultraviolet-sensitive inks. Invisible to the naked eye, the images only emerge when the gallery is plunged into darkness, which happens at unpredictable and irregular intervals, accompanied by the disturbing sound of knocking on wood, as if someone is trying to get out, or a stranger is approaching along a dark and empty corridor. A feeling of entrapment or captivity descends on the space, heightening one's sense of immersion in the darkness.

Victims, like the five missing girls in the Gert van Rooyen paedophile case, and Jamie Bulger, the two-year-old British toddler who was abducted and murdered by two 10-year-old boys, as well as perpetrators, like Mary Bell, convicted of strangling a young boy in 1968, the day before her 11th birthday, and Fred and Rose West, the Gloucester couple believed to have murdered at least 12 young women, all emerge from the sudden darkness.

But it is not easy to instantly identify these figures nor the maps and images of the sites where the acts of violence took place. The evidence comes to us in a strangely disembodied form. There is a lack of information, details and clues – nothing conclusive to go by. Only an eerie recognition of the mass media's filtered and fumbling, yet intensely hyperbolic, engagements with the density of the trauma that actually occurred. The facts are torn away from their sources so one is never quite able to join the dots or solve the mystery. In this way, Smith's laboratory-like art practice directly encapsulates the enigma of unsolved investigations.

In an accompanying text, Smith states that she is particularly interested in how, through repetition, certain photographic images get detached from their subjects and the representation of a person becomes emblematic of "victimhood", "the missing", "monstrosity" or "evil". One of the more ghostly aspects of the show is the relationship of place to deed. The crime scenes in Smith's works are visible to the naked eye and, viewed in the innocent light of day, they appear as innocuous pedestrian locales – pretty parks, suburban houses on arbitrary streets ... It is only when the light goes that the imprint of the crime and those involved in it become visible, as if the place itself has somehow been stained with the remnants of wrongdoing. It's a chilling forensic interpretation of the writer WG Sebald's deeply convincing assertions that places hold memory.

With this profoundly haunting and multi-layered exhibition, Kathryn Smith's ongoing exploration of forensic art has been taken to a new level and, for one, am duly terrified and thrilled at the prospect of what might come next.

Alex Dodd