

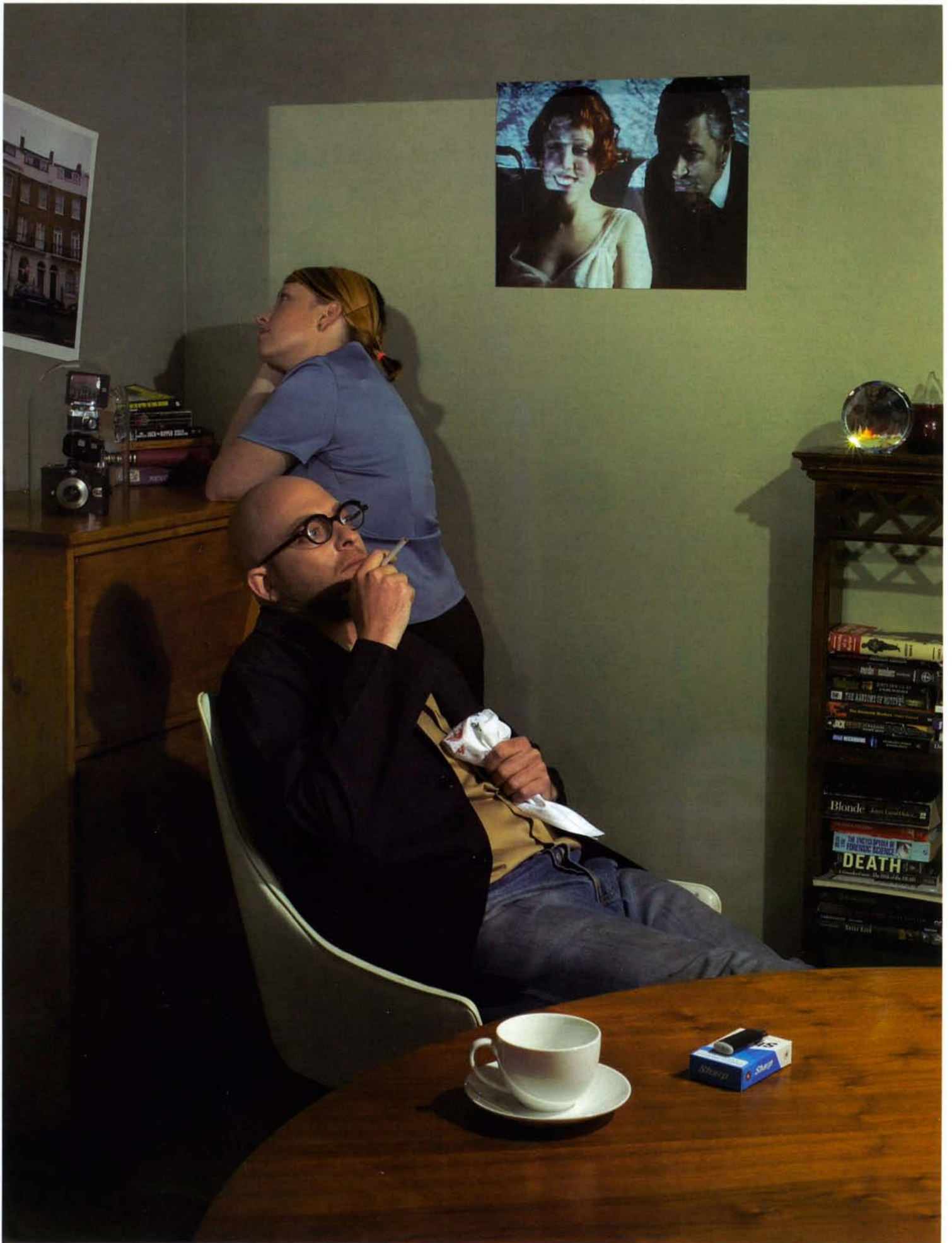


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EVIDENCE AND ARTIFICE

KATHRYN SMITH IS THE 2004 STANDARD BANK YOUNG ARTIST OF THE YEAR. IN AN INTERVIEW, **MAUREEN DE JAGER** QUESTIONS SMITH ABOUT HER INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY, FOLLOWING WHICH SHE OFFERS A READING OF THE ARTIST'S NATIONALLY TOURING SHOW **EUPHEMISM**

WHO IS KATHRYN SMITH?

THE ARTIST CHATS WITH MAUREEN DE JAGER

MdJ: It seems difficult to address the question "Who is Kathryn Smith?" without resorting to some hefty list-making. Not only are you this year's Standard Bank Young Artist, but you are also a critic, curator, lecturer, writer, art correspondent, judge, and member and director of many associations. So I guess it isn't surprising that the "Kathryn Smith" figured in your exhibition, *Euphemism*, is as multifarious a character, cast in various roles from corpse to pseudo-celebrity. Where do you see yourself – or, indeed, your *signature* – in all of this?

KS: If I were to be glib, I would say you answered the question. For me the signature is the very multifarious nature of it all; professional schizophrenia as 'signature', perhaps. But it's not really as simple as that. In the past I have spoken about this business of professional schizophrenia as a means of survival in an otherwise rather unforgiving professional life where support or patronage by the public or private sectors always seems to fall short. My solution for tackling this over the last couple of years was The Trinity Session, but there came a time when I felt I had to get back to my first love, which is critical, academic research.

Even as a student I never tried to separate creating, curating, critiquing. All the other hats I supposedly wear suggest a kind of role-playing. It's prudent to dress up a bit when seeing corporate clients, for instance. Masquerade. I was thinking about the line my recent work took and I realised it's absolutely a symptom of how I was living over the last four years. Endless other identities on hand as a method of self-preservation.

But with all that in mind, the signature is about a critical interaction, a dialectic, that happens between image and text, representation and interpretation, form and content, about creating third things in the difficult space where two objects, words or phenomena are forced to come together. It's about the translation of seemingly irrelevant or idiosyncratic references and interests into something that absolutely locks into contemporary issues.

facing page *Ennui*
1:2 (after Sickert),
2004, pigment
print on cotton
paper, 76.2 x
56.2cm.
Photographed by
Daron Chatz,
assisted by Sarah
Grant



MdJ: In the *Euphemism* catalogue, you articulate some reservations about contemporary art dealing with the “usual suspect” issues of identity, history, memory and body-politics. Yet your work may be argued to engage convincingly, if unconventionally, with these particular thematic concerns. What differentiates your approach?

KS: I see my work as absolutely engaging with all those issues. However, the reservations I have are legion. My issues have mainly to do with how this rhetoric gets trotted out by rote in relationship to some contemporary art from South Africa, and I think both those who publish it (critics, curators) and those who produce it, fall into the rhetoric because it sells well. That’s not to say that the work doesn’t actually deal with these issues – of course it does. The rhetoric gets used expediently instead of critically and productively. I set myself a task of delving into the archives of recent history, collecting all the art critical writing and reviews that attempt to position South African art post-1994. We’ve got some nifty new phrases and a few recycled ideas, but other than that, the terms have not really shifted that much in 15 years.

I recently gave several presentations to students in Port Elizabeth during the exhibition tour. One lecturer got really ticked off and demanded that I decide what it is that I want to be – artist, historian, detective and so on. He couldn’t seem to understand interdisciplinary methodology or performativity. A student also got rather uppity and said she couldn’t understand why I was awarded this prize when my work looks “so un-South African and too international”. What the fuck does *that* mean?

MdJ: So where, and how, do you position your work in relation to a contemporary South African context?

KS: I think the notion of what a contemporary South African context is, is still in development. To try and pin this down would be to maim all sorts of dynamic interfaces, which, although they might not be easy to package or even stomach, are fundamentally critical for any forward-thinking society to embrace. That I work in an interdisciplinary way is a reflection of how it is to function in a South African context, which to my mind seems to be about systems in development, where people are very performative about how they present themselves. And while all arts professionals are trying to find a place for themselves in an increasingly diverse mix, I don’t buy much of the rhetoric around identity, but choose rather to concern myself with positioning.

I would rather be known as an artist who happens to come from South Africa, than as a ‘South African artist’. My work, contrary to popular belief, does not deal exclusively in death and this current show is not about Jack the Ripper or Walter Sickert. It does respond to violence, whether social, historical, cultural, aesthetic and so on, but is actually fundamentally concerned with representation and narrative – something we con-

stantly face as ‘South African artists’ but which I choose to filter through the figure of Sickert as a kind of alter ego.

MdJ: Strange synchronicities, conspiracy theories and idiosyncratic overlaps seem to mark the “dark tourism” (to cite John Lennon and Malcolm Foley) of and through *Euphemism*. Does this suggest an attempt to read and reread meaningful connections in the (unreadable) face of violent death and serial murder? Or is the impetus the seductiveness of surface and artifice?



facing page *And then I missed you*, 2000, Lambda print, 60 x 80cm
this page Still from *Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)*, 2003 – 2004, DVD, 14min. Performance filmed by Daron Chatz and Jahmil XT Qubeka

KS: I’m not into fate or fortune telling, nor do I give much credit to creating significance where there is only coincidence. But enough forensic case studies will tell you there are no such things as coincidences. Rather, that twice is coincidence, and three times is a pattern. I like to think that the work operates within the poetics of empiricism rather than about poetics or empiricism as mutually exclusive things. So I would say it’s in-between. And I don’t think there is anything superficial about the deeper realms of representation.

Euphemism is the culmination of years of increasingly more formal interest in the representation and social framing of murder and violence as the zenith of excess and desire; as well as the aesthetic or creative potential murder seems to possess in the eyes of some – the Art of Murder. It finds its way through private experiences – often very belated, mediated, revisited, and therefore a bit nostalgic – of public events or reported phenomena that I may never have experienced first-hand.

I think the work, or at least the process by which the work came to be, is at the very opposite end of superficiality, although I love to work with seductive surfaces as a means of simultaneously deflecting and pulling one’s attention to what lies beneath. So the surface stuff of the work is as much of a framing device as it is a diversion. As such it mirrors the research and making process, figuring out which contact left what trace and taking it from there.

FORENSICS AND FANTASY

EVIDENCE AND ARTIFICE IN THE WORK OF KATHRYN SMITH

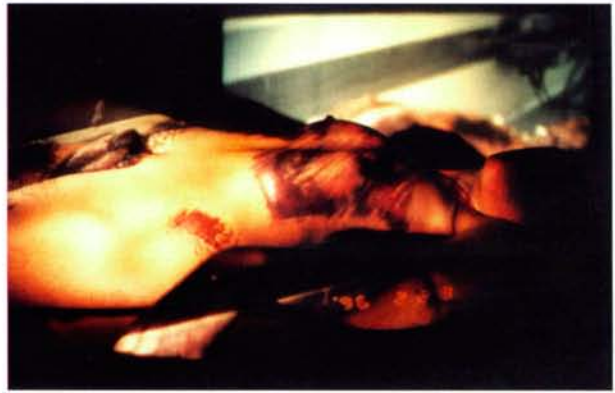
"If murder is where bodies and history cross," as cultural theorist Mark Seltzer suggests, then "'senseless' murder is where our most basic senses of the body and society, identity and desire, violence and intimacy, are secured, or brought to crisis". The work of 2004 Standard Bank Young Artist, Kathryn Smith, may be seen as a comparable bringing to crisis of these most basic senses. Numerous works on her intriguing exhibition *Euphemism*, which comprises a seductive ensemble of prints, photographs and DVD projections, derive impetus from the central motif of 'senseless' murder. More specifically, they evince Smith's interest in the slippery interface between the various forensic and aesthetic modes of representation through which such acts of violence are filtered and framed. Smith's careful orchestration of *Euphemism*, where individual works elucidate and confound each other like so many disparate clues, thus illuminates darkly the crossings not only between "bodies and history" but also between murder and art, forensics and fantasy, the representation of violence and the violence of representation.

That art and murder so often slip into one another is a point well made in Colin Richards's insightful catalogue essay. "Perhaps in some way murderers are failed artists; or is it", he asks, "that artists are failed murderers?" Prosaically, the uneasy alliance between art and murder exemplifies our enduring fascinations with "the romantic literary perception of the violent criminal as a kind of artist", as film theorist Joel Black points out. It is prevalent, for instance, in films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* and its sequel *Hannibal*, and also *The Death Artist* and *The Stendhal Syndrome*. In the context of Smith's exhibition, the artist Walter Sickert's equivocal implication in the Jack the Ripper murders – in part, due to the authentication of a Ripper letter as being written by Sickert – expresses a similar mutable doubling. It also elucidates Smith's preoccupation with the permeable boundaries between symbolic and actual violence.

Arguably, a key concern is Smith's intimation that actual violence is not easily separated from the multifarious representations (or symbolic gestures) that figure and inform it. The murder scene is a site of both actual and symbolic violence. It demarcates a space where, as Seltzer suggests, the signature patterns or "splatter codes" of the serial killer "endlessly cross and recross the line between image and body, between flesh and blood and symbol". Similarly, the actual bodies of the victims are not easily divorced from their status as representations. Not only are these marked bodies imaged by forensic specialists and by the media, but they are also marked as images by the killers who create them.

To quote American killer Ted Bundy: "We're talking about images... and it's a terrible thing to say... We're talking about anonymous, abstracted, living and breathing people... To a point they were symbols." The notion of the other as an image to be manipulated mirrors the killer's sense of self-as-image, or as a mediated and media-driven public personality. In the case of the Ripper, the archetypal signature killer, this translated not only into a series of murders in the streets of 1880's London but also into a series of over 300 letters mailed to the London press. "Letters and bodies, word counts and body counts, go together from the inception of serial murder", argues Seltzer. So, too, do the excesses of private desire and public spectacle.

These and other boundaries are provocatively blurred in Smith's multimedia performance titled *Jack in Johannesburg* (2003), which transformed the Luytens Room of the



Johannesburg Art Gallery into a spectacularly carnal reconstruction of a Ripper murder scenario. In the course of the performance, Smith, in white nightdress, had her upper left arm tattooed with the words of an FBI investigator – "Never look for unicorns until you run out of ponies" – in handwriting sampled from one of the letters allegedly sent by the Ripper. The performance raises uncomfortable questions about the dynamics of violence and representation. As with the killer's splatter codes, Smith's artistic inscription of the body evinces an unsettling crossing of the line "between image and body, between flesh and blood and symbol".

Not surprisingly, the figure of the Ripper himself was absent from this performance in much the same way that he features *in absentia*, rather than as an effigy, in the Ripper exhibition in Madame Tussaud's London wax museum. In Smith's reconstruction, as in the wax museum's, the absence of a literal or figurative representation bespeaks the Ripper's storied anonymity, which, to cite Seltzer, was "from the start a

A KEY CONCERN IS SMITH'S INTIMATION THAT ACTUAL VIOLENCE IS NOT EASILY SEPARATED FROM THE MULTIFARIOUS REPRESENTATIONS THAT FIGURE AND INFORM IT

projective surface for all sorts of stories". In both cases, "he is seen only spectrally, as an obscure shadow or dark shape minimally but therefore dispersively on the scene".

The DVD *Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)* (2003-4), derived from Smith's performance, further explicates this play of projection, absence and shadowy presence. Numerous scenes in this dense, multi-layered narrative show Smith and



tattooist Milo caught in the beam of a projection which turns them both into shifting projective surfaces and doubles them as shadows on the wall behind. To view this work, moreover, is to find oneself quite literally caught in the beam of its projection, one's own body now "an obscure shadow or dark shape" that interrupts the projected scene. This presence of the viewing self as a shadowy doppelgänger projected onto the artwork re-inscribes one's ostensibly innocent viewing as a precarious complicity. Inasmuch as Sickert may have considered the Ripper his alter ego or shadow-self, one must ask, are we, in our voyeuristic fascinations with representations of violence and death, not also vicariously complicit in such deeds?

In Otto Rank's treatment of the double (cited by Freud in his essay 'The Uncanny'), the shadow as an unnerving instance of doubling is particularly potent. This is not only because one's shadow represents a second self, but also because of the mythic link between shadows and the sun. What the shadow would get up to during its nightly retreat with the sun into the underworld was no doubt mischievous and disingenuous, unknown and unknowable to the conscious self. In this regard, the shadow as double in *Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)* points also to the slippages and overlaps between conscious acts and unconscious or repressed desires, between socialised behaviour and the lurking spectre of animalistic drives.

Here identity is a matter of division and ambiguity rather than unison and certitude, marked by the vicissitudes of perversion and desire. By extension, the boundary between self and other becomes somewhat messy and confused. This confusion of self and other as a leitmotif seems particularly pertinent in relation to Smith's earlier *Still Lives* (1997), where forensic photographs of dead victims were projected as slides onto her own body and the resulting scenes were re-shot. Smith's emulation of the dispositions of the corpses confounds one's attempts to draw a clear distinction between projected image of (dead) body and (living) body as projective surface.

Subtle misalignments of an ear or an eyebrow, for instance, suggest an uncomfortable, if unresolved, merging of projected image and corporeal ground.

Likewise, Smith's staging of herself as a dismembered corpse in her more recent *Memento Mori* (2004) evinces a similar conflation or othering of self. Uncannily, the profile Seltzer offers to describe the British serial killer Dennis Nilsen, who was arrested in 1983 for the murders of several young men, seems appropriate. For Nilsen, the yielding of identity to identification "involved, above all, a fixation on mirror images of his own made-up body and on the mirroring and photographing and filming of the made-up, taken apart, and artifactualized bodies of his victims. Nilsen, self-described as a 'central camera,' was addicted to the lifeless model body, his own and others: to the body made up as corpse".

The notion of the body "made up as corpse" would reiterate the porosity of the boundary between art and murder referred to earlier. Despite their obvious (and necessary) differences, what Smith and Nilsen seem to share is, in Seltzer's words, "an utter absorption in technologies of reflection, reduplication, and simulation" through which to make present and to re-present the experience of identity "as a matter of simulation and likeness". In this respect, Smith's preference for the medium of photography is far from fortuitous: the photograph is itself an instance of death mimicking life, a duplicitous surrogate that perpetuates and enlivens its subject even as it captivates and freezes. The photograph – as with the uncanny double or shadow-self – is not to be trusted; it is familiar, almost suffocating, in its close resemblance to the knowable self, but it is also the other that refuses assimilation.

It is here, perhaps, that Smith's use of photography approximates what photographer Jo Ractliffe calls "an impossible project". For Ractliffe, photography is perplexingly bound in desire and loss; the desire to capture and the failure to do so is what perpetuates further unfulfilled desire. Photography, seen in this light, is strangely congruent with the successively frustrated compulsions of serial violence – "a failed series of attempts to make the scene of the crime equivalent to the scene of the fantasy", to cite Seltzer. Indeed, Seltzer describes the serial killer's mimetic compulsion as "photography at the level of the object", where the captured scene is also necessarily the scene that escapes complete appropriation. Similarly, Smith's self-reflexive photographs may be seen to register concurrently these heady excesses and deficits in representation. The scene of the crime morphs into the scene of the fantasy, but in a manner that frustrates the certitude of closure and release.

In this, Smith's work also interrogates the photograph's alleged status as forensic truth. The photograph presents itself as an actual account, but it is also, as with the fugitive figure of the Ripper, "a projective surface for all sorts of stories". And in transgressing the boundaries between forensics and fantasy – where documentation perpetually transmutes into aestheticised projections of visualised desire, and vice versa – the photograph shows its own tenebrous violence. It is evidence and artifice in one.

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facing page, top
Still Lives #3, 1997,
 c-prints/lambda
 prints, 50 x 70cm
bottom *Still*
Lives #7, 1997,
 c-prints/lambda
 prints, 50 x 70cm
this page Detail
 from *Jack in*
Johannesburg; pro-
 duction still, 2003,
 pigment print on
 cotton paper, 76 x
 150cm.
 Photographed by
 Andrew Meintjes