

Kathryn Smith In Camera

Fotografins Hus

Contemporary Photography Exhibition Hall
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09 0327 – 09 0426

Fotografins Hus is proud to introduce Kathryn Smith's first solo exhibition in Stockholm and in Scandinavia. Smith is a leading artist, author/editor, curator and academic and a senior lecturer in the Department of Visual Art at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Smith has established a reputation as an artist for research-based work informed by forensic methods of investigation and an interest in serial crime and the rhetoric of evil.

An interview with Kathryn Smith by
Eva-Lotta Holm-Flach

The exhibition In Camera presents a subject that evokes many thoughts and emotions. It focuses on the representation of victims and perpetrators of extreme violent acts, including violence done to and by, children. What ideas initiated the work? What have been your main motives? Did it evolve from previous projects (such as Jack in Johannesburg), or was it something in your everyday surroundings that triggered it off?

I have always been deeply interested in extreme human behaviour, and while I do not want to stress that the work is 'about' the South African context, it is well-known that South Africa has a very high crime rate, and violence against children is particularly prevalent in the Western Cape. I became aware of this having moved from Johannesburg, which is a very fast city, to Cape Town, which is where tourists like to visit – it is far more conventionally scenic and laid-back than Johannesburg. It's like getting an anaesthetic! Murder and robbery in Johannesburg is unfortunately very common, whereas crime in Cape Town has a very different character, dominated by gang activities (often drug-related) on the Cape Flats, and a spate of murders of and by children within the first couple of months of my relocating here. Because of the nature of Cape Town's geography (a legacy of Apartheid urban planning), these events are largely invisible to privileged communities in Cape Town, as they take place on the Flats and in townships on Cape Town's periphery. Although I have seriously considered a career in forensic investigation in the past, I have realised I am less interested in closed systems of meaning – solving the crime, for instance – and more interested in the contingent factors surrounding the 'event' of the crime and what this can reveal about how we make sense of these events, that often evade comprehension. You use the words 'triggered' and 'motives' – these are words associated with the psychology of violence and crime. Like in photography we talk about 'shooting' and 'taking' pictures, there is violence implicit in the very language we use to describe our actions.

People in all times have been fascinated by violence, which is very obvious if one looks through the history of art and photography. Naturally, the representation of violence has varied throughout this history – what has

been your main source of inspiration in terms of the representation? Is there any particular period or artist that has been more important to you than others?

For me, the most violent works are those where the violence is not obvious, where perhaps you do not even see any clear evidence of violence at all. I am less interested in images of obvious bodily violence, for instance, that are full of blood. This is when the violence becomes 'spectacular', in the sense of a visual spectacle. For me, this approach is easily sensationalised – it is a kind of pornography of violence. The tabloid press is very good at this. Violence is much more complex when it is hidden, either as part of a political agenda, or when an individual finds ways to keep their violent desires and actions a secret. So I wanted to try and stress this hidden quality of violence. Violence is present in our everyday language, in our most well-intentioned interactions with others. I wouldn't say there has been a particular artist I was looking at, but obviously works by someone like Christian Boltanski have dealt with aspects of violence and memory in very affecting ways. Photography has always been a central focus; the very process of selecting, capturing and holding images through photographic processes echoes precisely my understanding of how language works to articulate ideas. And sometimes there are situations where language fails. Jacques Lacan referred to this as the 'real'. I think that images fail to capture the real emotional and cognitive impact of the events involving the people I have included on this show. And so to have images that appear and disappear, that you cannot 'fix' or hold onto, is a fair representation of my attitude towards violence; a complex ethical position for which I needed to find an aesthetic solution.

In Camera is quite a complex installation that involves many different kinds of media and expressions such as photography, drawing, painting and light. They all seem to point at one specific narration – the representation of the victim/perpetrator. The representation is further dramatized by the UV-light that goes on and off which makes the image disappear and develop right in front of the eye of the beholder. From your point of view, what role does the light play in the installation?

As in photography, light is a critical element: without it you would not have an image. But with In Camera, the aspect of light is inverted. 'White light', whether artificial or natural ambient light, is what illuminates the world around us, and is a prerequisite for the process of seeing. Of course 'light' is metaphorically understood as understanding, as in the Age of Enlightenment which introduced the rational, empirical view of the world. To be 'kept in the dark' about something is to have information withheld from you. This is of course an aspect of this show. Complete darkness is very disorientating – the 'unknown' that comes with total darkness can induce fear. Ultraviolet light, also referred to as black light, exists beyond the visible spectrum, and paradoxically, it can illuminate or make visible what we cannot see under normal lighting conditions. So working with white or ambient light, complete darkness and then ultraviolet light became a very useful device to talk about how we understand, or do not understand, certain events or actions. The timed sequence, which appears random but which is not, only provides a certain amount of time in which to see the images. Viewing the exhibition in this fragmentary way echoes the way I feel about the events represented in

the drawings – the minute I think I understand someone's motivations, the extremity of their actions makes me doubt whether one can really understand these events. Also, it reflects the fragmentary way the media reports these events. We are left with empty 'signs', unsure of what they really signify other than reductive impressions of 'evil' or 'victimhood'.

Your interest in the rhetoric of the representation and how the images get detached from their subjects could be related to Roland Barthes famous writing about photography. Among other things he writes about the photographic image as a paradox: an image experienced both in the present and as a past, and how the beholder simultaneously identifies both these "spaces". The way you organize your work seems related to these and other ideas of Barthes?

Yes of course. Barthes' thinking about photography has always been of particular interest to me, especially his connections between the photograph and death. He talks about photographs representing an "anterior future", this simultaneous present and past that you mention. He also talks about photography's innate reproducibility, its seriality: "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially", and also raises ideas about photography's inherent violence, "not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force [his italics], and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed". Powerful stuff, but then again, I am wary of the work being understood as 'led' by theory. My work is certainly influenced by theoretical ideas – I develop the form of the work in response to an idea. But you must be careful to not illustrate theory, as it leaves very little room for what can emerge through process. And like printmaking, photography is a process – there is very little instant gratification.

Your work on art is extensive: besides being an artist you also work as a curator and a writer on art. How do you combine all these different roles?

I realised quite early that I could not separate my work as artist, curator, researcher and writer. Each offer a different way into understanding the processes of producing and talking about art practice. They are aspects of an integrated approach. I started writing to try and articulate ideas around practices that was somewhat different to my own. Curating exhibitions allows me to interrogate a question and, through the works selected for that show, have answers to my question proposed by voices other than my own. The work I engage with through writing or curating often seems to include practices that are different to how I approach my own studio work. I have a deep interest in the dynamics of situated and participatory practices, but do not necessarily engage with this way of working unless it is through curation, writing or in educational contexts. I see everything as ultimately complementary, but of course it can be difficult to manage everything. I get bored very easily if I don't have at least three diverse projects happening simultaneously.

Being an artist from South Africa might raise questions concerning your identity as an "African" artist.

Is this a subject that matters to you, your position as a South African or African artist, from a global point of view?

I have always had a major problem with making claims to nationality as some form of authentication of an artistic position. For me, the context of one's production will always inform the work, but artists these days are very mobile – they travel, but also move between forms and media with a fluidity that some might say is particular to a globally networked generation. The internet became a reality during my undergraduate study and I can't imagine the possibility of not Skyping an artist in Rome on the weekend, and then chatting to someone in Senegal pretty much simultaneously. Ideas are what ultimately matter to me, and it is a pity that there is still such an industry in fetishising artists from 'peripheral' zones (Africa, Asia etc). At worst, it results in tokenism; at best it explodes conventional Western ideas around art practice. For me, my work is often accused of not being 'African enough', and I really don't know what to say about that, other than it would be like me saying to a German artist, for instance, that their work is not 'German' enough. What does this mean? Surely we have to have moved away from cultural stereotypes by now? But yet still, artists are included onto exhibitions for the context or culture they supposedly represent, rather than for their particular artistic position. It makes me rather angry.

About Kathryn Smith

Kathryn Smith was born in 1975 in Durban and is currently based in Cape Town, South Africa. She graduated from the University of Witwatersrand with a BAFA (Printmaking) and MAFA by Coursework and Research, both with distinction. She has won several awards and grants and is widely published. Kathryn Smith has a particular interest in developing discourses around experimental and radical practices in contemporary South African art, with particular focus on new media, dialogical praxis and performance.

About Eva-Lotta Holm-Flach

Eva-Lotta Holm Flach has a Master Degree from the Department of History of Art, Stockholm University. Curator and director at Galleri Flach+Thulin, Stockholm.

In Camera by Kathryn Smith is part of Fotografins Hus project

In Focus : African Contemporary Art and Photography.

Should you have any questions regarding purchasing Kathryn Smiths work, please contact Dorothea Flodin +46 (0)8 6116969.

Fotografins Hus

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Saturday – Sunday 1200 – 1600

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