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FRESH PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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### Between Two Truths

Forman's Smokehouse Gallery, London.



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In his preface to *A Dice Thrown*, Stéphane Mallarmé writes that his "blanks" are important, that they "strike first", and that "versification requires them like surrounding silence...". Moving this from literature into the visual field, *Between Two Truths* seems to ponder something similar, with many of the works foregrounding not just the subject, but also the space around the subject – the weight, the significance of everything that's in-between.

From the entrance of this exhibition of photographs, curated by Matthew Booth, recently graduated from the MA programme in photography at the Royal College of Art, the initial impression is of images of darkness and images of light resounding around the space, a recurring motif that seems to signify, as well as the silence of the subject, something of the extremes, the excesses and of course the limitations of the photographic process.

For example, opposite the gallery entrance is Booth's *Untitled Black Photograph # 4* – a large-scale photograph, pitch black, apparently depicting nothing at all. On closer inspection however, the sense of complete nothingness collapses as the work is revealed as two photographic images mounted side by side so that the seam running down the vertical midline of the piece is elevated in status from a technical aside to an integral component of the work in relation to subject matter itself. Up this close, it is clear that the work is distinctly analogue, insisting on the integrity of the photographic process, through the retention of process driven irregularities that would normally be eliminated, such as the white dust spots that pepper the surface of the paper and the slight bleed of light into the image's white border from the darkroom's masking frame.

This work endures as an influence for Booth, functioning as a kind of canvas, if not directly, then certainly in the sense of it being "once removed". Other works presented are photographs of the reflections in the inky black surface of *Untitled Black Photograph # 4*, and thus, a strange kind of rhetorical puzzle develops, each image referring back to the other, and also to the space in which it's installed, in a potentially endless game of referencing and self referencing – a photographic hall of mirrors.

Emma **Critchley** also works with the extremes of darkness and light, testing out, or playing with the limitations of the visual field. Her series of portraits *One Breath*, shot at night, traces the single outward breath of her sitters, each submerged below the surface of some water. As individuals they are barely perceptible, as figures, maybe a little more so, but still, while, strictly speaking, these images depict people, they do not feel like portraits in any traditional sense of the word – more they are apparitions, barely there, their presence strangely ephemeral, like a shadow, a memory, as if these trapped faces are haunting the image, nearly expressionless – but maybe, just maybe, with the faintest hint of desperation. On the press release, we are informed that the length of the breath "determines the length of the exposure", and thus the technicalities and contingencies of the photographic process are once again implicated into the aesthetics of the final piece.

Stuart **Bailes** works both in the studio and also outside, "in the field", bringing elements from each environment into the context of the other. The works in his series *Hidden (Forest)* show a forest at night, the darkness punctuated in each image by an identically neat ellipse of light. Lit from above by an unseen lamp inexplicably lowered into position, the forest floor glows eerily and beautifully green against the inky darkness surrounding it. Motivated by forensics, theatrics, or a mixture of the two, the series seems inspired by the encounter between the "natural" and that which is essentially "not natural" – photography itself.

Other works in the show, for example Louise O'Kelly's *I Shimmer on Horizon*, explore related themes, linked to the specifics of photographic representation, especially in relation to the landscape, and the natural world. Roy Mehta depicts the natural world in uniquely photographic terms, playing with exaggerated perspective to create a strange, distorted, almost fevered rendition of the English botanical landscape. Tim Soar's practice seems rooted in the more traditional pictorial tradition of landscape photography, and indeed, the press release cites the "150 year tradition of the craft of photography" as a key influence.

*Between Two Truths* explores how photography continues to grapple with the relationship between subject matter and form. In a celebration of process, the works collude to ask questions around how photography could ever adequately and definitively deal with the undeniable resilience of the subject itself. The subject that is, and the spaces in between.

**Reviewed by: Sophy Rickett**

**Street address:** Stour Rd

**Country:** United Kingdom

**City:** London

**County/State:** Fish Island

**Postcode:** E3 2NT

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