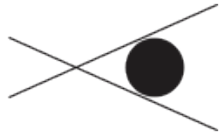


aperture



review

May 20th, 2014

## Black in the Rose Garden: Sarah Jones at Anton Kern Gallery



Sarah Jones draws out her photographs as opposed to simply taking them. The artist creates environments for contemplation and, with the slow pace of a meticulously traced still life, forms staid yet poetic images with her camera. A whist rose, some cloth laid out, a long-haired woman; Jones's images are never ugly, but always unsettled.

The London-based artist, born in 1959 and educated in painting and fine art at Goldsmiths, has been photographing various subjects of intellectual and aesthetic curiosity since the 1990s. Whether it be an analyst's couch, a close-to-empty artist's studio, a horse, a young woman, or a decaying flower frozen in some Cimmerian shade, Jones chooses austere subjects—academic propositions tied to the weight of art history. These images are beautifully sequenced in the artist's first monograph, *Sarah Jones*, published in October 2013 by Violette Editions. Accompanied by two essays and an interview, the book provides a substantial and rich description—in all its diversity of subject matter and allusion—of Jones's practice to date. A recent exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery in New York, which closed April 26, picked up on this survey by presenting works from the book alongside more recent images. Twenty-one pictures were positioned evenly along the gallery walls. No room for mess here; everything was framed, contemplated, and presented in blackness.

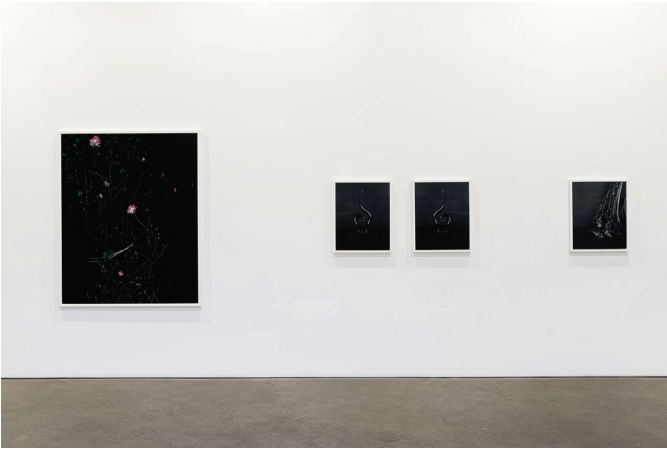
In her photographs, the artist draws out the deep black tones made possible by expert analog printing from black-and-white negatives, surrounding the images' focal points in a fabricated night (some of the images are shot in daylight with a flash, "radically underexposed," as Brian Dillon writes in his essay in the book). Van Gogh

thought there was a better way to give color depth than to use black; in an 1888 letter to his younger art dealer brother Theo, the painter offered some examples and a word of warning: "Indigo with terra sienna, Prussian blue with burnt sienna, really give much deeper tones than pure black itself . . . I retain from nature a certain sequence and a certain correctness in placing the tones; I study nature, so as not to do foolish things, to remain reasonable." In photography, however, this is made irrelevant by the way photographic printing selectively occludes rather than favors natural objects, plucking out any object from a black, chemical space whatever its distinction. Jones uses lighting techniques to fabricate a black backdrop for the naturalness of flowers or a horse to appear in front of, therefore placing them in a strange sort of isolation: the natural and the chemical sit together in a blank, distinctly photographic frieze.

Jones's theoretical references have included Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and other pedestalled intellectuals seemingly bound to photography and its theories in the UK and further afield since their introduction in the 1970s by Victor Burgin, among others. The artist demonstrates this in part through a body of work featured in the book—but not the exhibition—titled *Consulting Room*, in which the empty and therefore perhaps untroubled spaces of analysts' couches recall psychoanalytic theory and its relationship to the photographic image. Some of the couch covers appear creased, evoking recent use, while others seem neat and as yet unperturbed. In A. M. Homes's interview with the artist in the book, Sarah Jones explains how she began photographing these couches during her master's studies as "a response to the theory being taught." The influence of photography theory from 1970s and '80s on contemporary work in the UK has now become nearly overbearing, but Jones handles these tricky and somewhat hackneyed reference points with little naiveté, an admirable sensitivity, and, importantly, a light touch.

Two later bodies of work included in the monograph and Anton Kern exhibition, *Rose Gardens* and *Cabinet*, expand and trade instead on the meaning of historically prevalent objects from the nineteenth century. Victorian designer Augustus Pugin's gothic revivalist tendencies are apparent in a photograph of an elaborate iron screen (*Screen I*, 2014), while in another image, the reflective qualities of a gazing ball—an object often associated with the English Victorian garden—allude to the diverse interior design of the period. The compositional influence and style of photographer Karl Blossfeldt's botanical studies is certainly present in Jones's photographs of roses, as is Muybridge's black horse, here presented motionless and in almost complete obscurity against its black background in the photograph *Horse (profile) (black) (I)*, from 2010.

The artist also has an interest in the very Victorian cultural obsession with photographing hair—one which, today, is also perpetuated by collectors Brad Feuerhelm in London and W. M. Hunt in New York, who amass such fetishistic photographs, not to mention younger artists such as Tereza Zelenkova, a former student in the photography department at the Royal College of Art, where Jones tutors. To her credit, Jones avoids overstating this particular gothic cliché, only lightly referring to the existence of such visual preoccupations in her own works *The Park (II)*, *The Living Room (I)*, and *The Guest Room (II)*, all 2002–3.



Jones included several diptychs in the Anton Kern exhibition, which could be read as direct reflections of a single picture. Like Rorschach inkblots, the artist's compositions, such as *Vitrine 1/1* (2014), fold in on themselves, as one might expect from a hinged canvas trapping the view of a subject and conjoining one picture to another. The only hidden doors in Jones's *Cabinet* images, which depict empty black vitrines, are metaphorical; these photographs appear to have little actual depth. As Van Gogh observed, "Black is not as deep as it looks: mixing the dark tones of nature together produces a depth like no other"—perhaps including that produced by the canonized theorists of photographic representation. One can either fall into black interiors in this exhibition or have them collapse around you.

Darkness certainly demands something, and it is in this space that Jones asks us to consider her work. What first appears black in her photographs is actually silver, gray, or even purple. While the language of academic art-making might often be narrow and elusive, the artist either reflects back her references to art history and photographic theory or folds them in on themselves, saving her own work from didacticism. Her pictures are generous not just in terms of intellectual context and reference, but also in sheer attractiveness.

---

Daniel C. Blight is a writer and critic based in London who contributes to the *Guardian*, *frieze*, and *Notes on Metamodernism*. He is the editor of The Photographers' Gallery blog and the curator of *Chandelier*, a project space for contemporary art in Hackney, London.