

John Stathatos: Sidney James Diamonds in Australia

Waterman's Gallery, Brentford

This show is officially described as an installation, but it doesn't look like one. What you actually see is four poster-sized black and white photographs, obviously developed from damaged negatives.

All of the photographs show groups of men in the Australian landscape. Apart from one, which has three figures in a rowing boat, all the images are of the same four men. One of

Photograph from 'Sidney James Diamonds in Australia', an installation by John Stathatos at Waterman's, Brentford. See review

these men – shorter, heavier, than the others, bare-headed but sporting a tie, stands a little apart, to the right of the main group, in each image. His hair is thick and a little unruly. This figure dominates the others; more than this, he dominates the landscapes in which he appears. His pose is consciously relaxed, his gaze either rising assertively above us or confronting us through narrowed eyes. Standing in the boat, he raises his hat to us in a statesman's wave.

This, in fact, is Sidney James Diamonds, the newly naturalised citizen of Australia; before this, he was Sarandos Diakopolous. His change of name appears to have been intended as a gesture of identification, of arrival. Australia, as the photographs suggest, was his country. John Stathatos, who arranged the

exhibition, says that his research indicates that these are self-portraits – manifestations, staged by Diamonds, of his chosen vision of himself.

This may all seem rather over-worked as a description of four distinctly uneventful photographs. The attention which these photographs demand depends, at least in part, on the fact that there are only four of them; after travelling on various buses, tubes and trains for rather more than an hour and a half, I was inclined to believe that there must be something here that I was intended to see.

Reading Stathatos' notes, you begin to understand that this is precisely the response he is interested in. In any uncharged situation you might well simply scan the images, take in the landscape, and leave. In the gallery, you ascribe to them some of the significance which they had to their maker. Who were the other people? What was their relationship with Diamonds? Did he own the land in which he poses, or did he just intend to? As each face becomes familiar, you begin to suspect that there is another, unknown member of the group – the photographer? But these are self-portraits, so perhaps this other member is Diamonds himself as a viewer of the finished image – or his family in Greece, who we are told resisted his emigration? This ideal viewer is irrecoverable. These photographs are part of the making of a private myth, and he could no more have foreseen that they would have found their way to a gallery in Brentford than that they should do so via a suitcase found in a cupboard in an abandoned house – in Greece. Diamonds returned to Greece, and died with the name with which he was christened. We are not the posterity he had imagined – but then neither was he.

Stathatos' text, the research which this discovery inspired, is the real heart of this exhibition – which is how it comes to be presented as an installation. It brings us back to the question of how the flotsam and jetsam of the past can suddenly be recharged with new significance; its lack of function distresses us, and the urge to recover and to discover meaning, significance, is not only something remarkably close to a universal human impulse, but also a key to our response to art. Stathatos relies on this impulse in tempting us to remain in the gallery long after we have exhausted the most obvious response (seeing four old photos of dead men in Australia).

What is the value of this kind of exhibition? After all, though the images are quite striking, I can't agree with Stathatos that they are anything truly remarkable in themselves. The presentation converts these images into little allegories – allegories about the assertion of identity in the face of among other things, mortality – and forces us to acknowledge our gratitude for being led to these allegories as a way of dignifying experience. This experience can be as grand as emigration, or as banal as travelling to a gallery, a point which is well made when Stathatos teases us with the idea that the whole text may be a fake – a lie or an art work.

This is one of those shows which, by a single alienating manoeuvre, gives us pause. Diamonds was, by all (available) accounts, a pillar of every society he inhabited. What did he want out of his life? What do we? (to Oct 28)

CHARLES HALL

