

## Ian Walker & Verdi Yahooda Cardiff Ffotogallery

Over the years, the Cardiff Ffotogallery has acquired a reputation for imaginative programming, typified by such exhibitions as **True Stories & Photofictions** (1987) and the unexpectedly apt conjunction of August Sander and Sue Packer in 1985. Unlikely as it may at first have seemed, the recent bracketing of work by Ian Walker and Verdi Yahooda proved equally inspired. Ian Walker combines an awareness of the workings of photographic culture with a wicked sense of humour; his *Postcard Views* (Chapter, 1983) preserved for posterity an unlikely group of minor masterpieces including "The Olde Worlde Cafe, Bosherton", and "Scotties and Bagpipes". His contributions to this show, *Little Chefs*, *The Brontë Suite* and *Wimpy Bars & Avebury Stones* came disguised as straightforward photographic documentaries in the classic British style. Closer examination showed them to be a carefully calculated subversion of the genre carried out with considerable wit and elegance.

*Little Chefs* is a mock survey; a series of colour prints gravely documenting the well known chain of fast food restaurants which have covered the country like a scarlet pox. Attracted at first by their lurid red colour scheme, inane trademark and semi genteel, semi tacky aura, Walker rapidly became fascinated by the way in which these buildings suddenly appear on the map with an almost contemptuous disregard for environmental considerations. In response, he places them with fastidious care in the landscape: about to be engulfed by a coal tip in Penmaenmawr, peering coyly behind a spray of cherry blossom in the Wye Valley, framed by a lurid sunset in Snetterton... so many little shrines to corporate seediness, photographed in the most earnest of new colour/new topographics style. In Newbury, where in 1984 twenty one Greenham Common protesters were arrested after being banned from the premises by the restaurant management, your friendly local Little Chef can just be glimpsed behind a massive concrete tank trap of an underpass.

*The Brontë Suite* is an homage to that other invention of the Thatcher years, the heritage industry, which in the name of profit has so effortlessly reduced both high and low culture to a homogenised pap. At a time when ersatz cultural associations can be derived even from television soap opera, the Brontë industry cheerfully feeds off myths of literary greatness and romantic passion in the ever popular context of nineteenth century ruralism. Searching for its traces in likely and unlikely places, Walker salvages for our delectation the Brontë chess set; the Brontë quilt; the Brontë airtread antibacterial latex foam shoe insole; the Brontë Suite in a Bradford Hotel; Brontë "original unique Yorkshire liqueur"; and, in a marvellous confusion of disjointed references, the Brontë "old fashioned Muesli Yorkshire biscuit". With *Wimpy Bars & Avebury Stones*, Walker virtually turns this approach against himself. Looking for a companion set to *Little Chefs*, he has paired Polaroid SX-70 images of hamburger bars with portraits of individual

stones from Avebury circle; the dislocation is total. As Walker notes, “there could hardly be a bigger gap between the two subjects; whatever meaning there is falls into the crevasse between them”.

On the first floor of Ffotogallery, Verdi Yahooda's three large installations offered the greatest possible contrast to Walker's soberly framed prints, but her work addresses some of the same questions of representation. *Window Dressing* was first shown at the Photographers' Gallery in 1988; two of the original works travelled to Cardiff, supplemented by a third which was constructed for this exhibition. Yahooda has taken colour photographs of Amsterdam shopfronts and window displays, blown them up to life size, and used a variety of framing devices including drapes, curtains and timber construction to set off the image. By ‘dressing’ them in this fashion, she neatly undermines the apparently simple representational intent of the original photographs. The photographs in question are, in any case, difficult enough to interpret, for it looks almost as though the Dutch window arrangers were in turn collaborating with Yahooda; far from being simple mediating devices intended to promote some commercial transaction, these displays present installations of a baffling eccentricity. One of them contains the statuette of a blindfolded man carrying golf clubs, standing by a miniature deck chair and crate of soft drinks; another, obviously the window of some mysterious commercial establishment, mutely proposes a large colour photograph of the Pope pinned onto a sweep of bright red material.

© John Stathatos 1989

First published in *Art Monthly*, London, March 1989