

A SEXTANT FOR MNEMOSYNE: Mari Mahr's "Isolated Incidents"

The imagination, like all things in time, is metamorphic. It is also rooted in a ground, a geography.

Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination*

Before me, over the tussocky moorland, the train stood at the frontier station, a thin plume of smoke rising vertically from its funnel, a cluster of cars and people all around. Once again I was reminded of Africa, where you sometimes see the big steam trains standing all alone, inexplicably waiting, in the immense and empty veldt. I looked behind me then, back over the peninsula: and like grey imperfections on the southern horizon, I saw the warships coming.

Jan Morris, *Last Letters from Hav*

The best travelers' tales are the tales of artists. Messages in bottles, dispatches from Arcadia or the heart of darkness which merge experience and imagination, the known and the unknowable – flashes of insight sometimes illuminating more than the most painstaking analysis, the most obsessive of statistics. What geographer could improve on Robert Byron's observation that the vast, ash-grey ruins of Balkh, oldest of cities, lie on the plains of Oxiana "tired as only a suicide frustrated can be tired"? Or on the unforced irony of Roger Palmer's discovery that a wrecked car in the South African desert shifted from white to black in the camera's eye as the sun moved across the sky?

Mari Mahr has lived in England since 1972, and yet her work has always seemed to lie serenely against the grain of British visual tradition; drawing strength and inspiration from European culture, she has the exile's sense of place and history, and an awareness of how they can both transform and be transformed by memory. She is also alive to the power of things – often ephemeral objects, insignificant in themselves, which may nevertheless carry a charge powerful enough to release memories and associations long since buried. It is on these two elements – the assumption of a shared European culture, and the talismanic power of objects – that her haunting photographic tableaux are based.

Her early gum bichromates (*Larousse Encyclopedia*, 1978 and *Science Experiments*, 1980) recalled the mysterious and endlessly fascinating illustrations of the bulky pre-war reference books found in middle-class homes from Dieppe to Sofia, while the 1980 series *Movie Pictures* were a stylised homage to the vocabulary of forties and fifties cinema. Within a year, Mahr began to experiment with sequencing in her "biographical" trilogy *Georgia O' Keefe*, *A Chinese Woman* and *Lily Brik* (1981–2); her object was not so much the construction of a straightforward narrative fiction, always a treacherous enterprise in photographic terms, but rather the resonance of one image against the next and the deliberate accumulation of associated references.

13 Clues to a Fictitious Crime (1984) confirmed Mahr's mastery of a technique she has been elaborating ever since: constructed images in which a photograph provides the backdrop for a simple assemblage of objects, both elements combining on a single, virtually flat optical plane. The fables enacted on this re-photographed stage seem to inhabit a visionary landscape, silent and disturbing yet oddly familiar; as in dreams, we may suddenly recognise the peculiar aptness of an image or correlation without necessarily understanding in what way it speaks to our imagination.

Later, and particularly in the remarkable group of sequences made in 1985 which include *Once Upon a Time There was a Soldier, Talking About Singing* and *A Few Days in Geneva*, Mahr turned increasingly to subjective evocation. The dream landscapes became more personal, recapitulating specific memories of places and experiences, while a personal element also crept into the fabric of the images; the model whose arms, hands and feet are superimposed on the Geneva roofscape of *A Few Days...* is wearing Mahr's clothes, while the silver votive figurine which floats up and away from the cobbled streets of *Idle Times* is a personal talisman which has become a stand-in for the artist herself.

The sense of place mentioned above is strongly present in many of these sequences; perhaps most obviously in the nostalgia of *Viragom, Viragom*, with its background photographs of Hungarian peasants, but also in the clutter of books, cigarette packages and samovars which define the long-vanished East European locus of *Lily Brik*, in the dizzying perspective of regimented fish-scale tiles which so perfectly embodies Calvin's saturnine city, and above all in the desperately sad post-war landscape through which the faceless lead soldier of *Once Upon a Time* trudges on his way to an empty house.

Indeed, if an elegiac quality seems so frequently present in Mahr's work, it is because that quality is inseparable from any meditation on memory: we are the only animal which lives not just in the present, but in a continuum embracing past and future. Memory, which opens windows in the past, goes hand-in-hand with the knowledge of our own dissolution; to look back into what has gone is to remember also what must inevitably come to pass.

The elegiac note is struck again in the most personal, even hermetic of Mahr's latest sequences, *Near to Nice I Was Reminded of Death*, behind which lies a characteristically dense network of allusions: irrational memories, nostalgia for the South of France, fragmentary images of the monastery at Cimiez, and a private, lifelong obsession with Andrej Wajda's film *Ashes and Diamonds*. Knowing of the Wajda resonance, a cinematically sophisticated viewer might perhaps relate the head in the first three prints to one of the film's seminal scenes, Maciek's uncovering of the murdered worker's head in the ruined chapel – but does this matter? If the sequence speaks to the viewer, then it does so on almost subliminal level. To try and dismember its mechanism would be as futile as a line-by-line explication of one of John Ashberry's poems; *Self-Portrait in a Convex*

Mirror, say, which is also, among other things, a discourse on the workings of memory: "...And each part of the whole falls off / And cannot know it knew, except / Here and there, in cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time".

And what are the vacant, gaping windows of the torn carte-de-visite album pages in Mahr's ironically titled *Ordered Interiors* if not, precisely, Ashberry's "cold pockets of remembrance"? The vanished photographs once held between the pages of the album were, of course, portraits; with the passing of time, more and more of them would come to represent the dead, like those other portraits, increasingly faded by sun and rain, which used to be placed on the funerary monuments of Italy and Greece. By now, the album's windows have turned into the sealed, anonymous crypts of an ossuary, marked only by pools of wax from long-dead commemorative candles.

"Isolated Incidents" is the overall title chosen by Mari Mahr for her latest group of sequences; incidents which she describes as made up of captured moments, exercises in the recreation of events that never occurred. Yet for all that, they are associated with very specific places: the Midi of *Near to Nice*, Israel, Rarotonga and China. Of the four, it is Israel which provoked the most direct engagement with political realities. During 1986, Mahr explored a half-ruined Palestinian village near the flourishing kibbutz of Ein Harrod, and was startled by the sound of jets flying high overhead; in *Historical Grievances*, it is a small wooden doll from India - another stand-in for the artist - which is portrayed among the crumbling stone walls. In the fifth image of the sequence, the stubby model of a fighter plane is stalled against the sky, trapped by a loop of wire wrapped around its fuselage.

The images inspired by Rarotonga which make up *A Time in The South Pacific* are altogether more light-hearted. There is a gentle playfulness and sense of humor in these recollections of a landscape seemingly composed only of water, clouds and horizon. A fish relaxes in a rocking chair, unmindful of the grass shack which last season's hurricane has dropped into the sea behind it; more fish perform a dance round a crumpled map of the island; and a dug-out on the edge of the surf is towing a child's toy boat. These images lay no claim to interpretation, nor are they an upmarket version of some arrogant "24 Hours in the Life of a South Sea Island" project, yet they communicate an authenticity of experience beyond the reach of most representational strategies.

Mahr's scruples about photography's assumed knowingness, its implied assumption of understanding, are evident in the title she has given her long Chinese series, *On The Second Day in China* - a title which reasserts her insistence that these are recollections, not conclusions. The China of *A Chinese Woman* had been imaginary, based entirely on a reading of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*; when, years later, Mahr was able to visit the real Middle Kingdom, she was struck by the richness of Chinese myth and symbolism, and by the way its manifestations still seemed an integral part of everyday life.

On the Second Day makes copious use of symbols such as the bat, emblem of happiness and good luck, and the horse, which represents the female principle in the I-Ching. It is interesting to note that, by an unusually elegant stroke of serendipity, Mahr's normal practice is in complete accord with the traditional philosophy of Oriental painting, in which every single element of a composition has a symbolic meaning. In the early seventeenth century, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci gained acceptance among Chinese intellectuals through his prodigious feats of memory; once, in Nan-ch' ang, he recited an entire volume of poetry after a single reading, and followed this up by repeating, forwards and then backwards, a random list of five hundred unrelated Chinese characters. Ricci owed this talent to an early obsession with the ancient mnemonic technique of constructing imaginary palaces, each room of which, as well as every item "placed" therein, becomes a cue or association for the fact to be memorised.

Perhaps we might think of Mari Mahr's images as rooms in just such a memory palace, each with its own burden of metaphor and allusion; but with this difference, that the memories released have to do not with facts, but with emotions. All that is necessary is a willingness to enter them.

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