

INTIMACY

In the *Being Numerous* essay *Ghost Stories*, Natasha Lennard writes that “intimacy lives in those places we don’t reduce to the wholly explicable, even though we could”. Appropriately this sits without further unpacking, present in the background as she grapples with the potential of her belief that her bathroom ghost is real, while simultaneously believing that ghosts don’t exist.

With such places in mind, driving too many pins in this work feels counterintuitive. Like in this bathroom ghost’s existence, mutual non-exclusion and nebulousness feel important when moving around this collection; the charge from the live relationships of image-making and experience may then be kept. The risk of lessening that hum with exacting intent makes writing feel like an echo of these artists’ loaded medium: either it is something that can itemise, dichotomise, establish hierarchy, or can hook a finger beneath these histories and readings, and play with such a closeness.

In working with these conditions, the artists work with schisms above any simple irony. In Zoe Hamill’s *A Map Without Words*, she applies archival typology to her photographs, categorising her connection to the land of her family’s home in an unnamed townland to the same standards of the British Museum. Hamill is not, however, feigning the cool eye of a supposedly objective lens. The project touches there with a flat, institutional mid-grey background—recording ephemera of the landscape like a twig, an old animal rib—but throughout, the land and place makes itself more palpable and an imperfecting, living presence, echoing the offering hands that prop up and connect with “subjects”. This grey moves variously into the crumpled backing fabric (bringing out all the colours of a small but vicious-looking bruise), heavy mist across a cattle field, and an outhouse wall as backdrop for drying wood, chains and ratchet straps, cropped close and decontextualised. The neutralising effect of these greys, in its multiple registers of overlapping and semi-permeable collections, frustrate this partially detail-oriented approach; it is similar in effect to the repeatedly obliterated physical space in which seasonal weather and growth writes time, with mossy, soft, wet wood, and root-like, serpentine dried branches. People are still aspects of this evoked space, not clinically recorded but with soft focuses and within, rather than against, the land. The futility of an idea of knowing, owning, and capturing Hamill’s aspects of connection, is embodied when things so specific to themselves and personal knowing are made to typify in their encyclopaedic shell. A background/subject hierarchy is set up, inverts and blurs like a lens finding its focus, and is thwarted.

Large institutional photographic archives are loaded, unable to shake off their association with declared truth. They sit in a tradition of gathering and ring-fencing place to form centralised perspectives, and the historical entwinement of such a practice with anthropological colonial projects. The *a priori* of photography’s subjectivity is well established, but the image is still treated as evidential; it only absorbs some fallibility in the recognition of the photo as a construction. The boundaries of art, documentary and photojournalism blur, yet photography is still categorised by old proximities to “realness” and

categories of information dissemination. Moving around what is directly unrepresentable in photography—climates between people, physical space, conscious and unconscious desires—is a means to hold something outside the complete evidence of authenticity. The image can instead be satellite-like, be “bad” in encasing its so-called content or photography’s conventional formal qualities. Moving away from the binary of reality and unreality, both states are possible (like Lennard’s ghost), and can still work away from placing representation at the forefront of imaging.

Audrey Gillespie’s *This Hurts* feels like a frustration in a wider, resonating imperative to perform, but without that onus of representation. The fractured world-building moves into and out of the image’s potential to create it, weaving through and alongside the complex and bittersweet joy-seeking happening beyond the image. Preparation for moments of kinship and literal performance are mixed with aftermath, remnants of the night and an impending repressive morning in tired, heavy stares; again, not in two binarized states, but an unspoken complexity of this experience at all times. Much of Gillespie’s images are liminal, the moments between the space made for queer joy and the laden context that it is borne from: performers mid-dressing (or undressing) in drag; falling/submerging in a solo trust-fall into a swimming pool; a hazy impending hug. Bedrooms, living rooms and bathrooms are mixed sites of preparation, playful use and agitation, acted to camera or snapped from a distance.

In *Cruising Utopia*’s chapter on queer utopian art and aesthetics, José Esteban Muñoz mentions that one aspect of queerness is a refusal to a part of the Marcusean performance principle; that is, the feedback loop where individuals perform to pre-established ways of being that suggest a long-held, rational arrival at contemporary conditions, where as a result, they feed into apparatuses of capitalism disproportionate to any personal benefit they offer. Participation binds people to working in ways that make no personal sense; such a refusal therefore “allows the human to feel and know not only our work and our pleasure but also ourselves and others”. *This Hurts* shows this refusal is by no means simple, especially when you are alive in a palpably traumatised and repressed part of the world. Instead refusal is a porous, repeating position, with a different and complex performance of authenticities, alternative states, compulsions to move out of self-containment as an *a priori* condition, and yet remain in conflict with this shifting. As such there is a queering of the boundaries of the self, and the uncertainties that are acceptable to be voiced in such an action.

This atomisation of contemporary life is potent in our relationship to the wider collection’s images through and beyond the lens. Gillespie’s occasional annotations recall private, diaristic notes, but bring our relationship to the work as viewers to the forefront. “Could you leave?” might be a memory, a request to a memory; perhaps a plea to the camera, a non-consent to this relationship with the unseen viewer. It also addresses us (or you, or me, to use less distancing language), the person that gazes and offers nothing directly back, exposing this dynamic of trust and imposition. Looking, too, is an act of intimacy, an un-detailed yet certain future for all connected in the photograph’s web. Everyone is implicated.

This is not a linear relationship passed from photographer, to scene, to people, to image, to viewer. As time passes the dynamic to viewing changes, mixed with the potency of supposing what the other sees or wants to be seen; this intimacy of looking becomes a stuttering feedback and evolving experience. Helio León's series is open-ended and iterative, made generously and responsively to his life and those within it. Moving through queer and underground scenes, these are overlapping spectrums of his connections in different cities. Like Gillespie's "Could You?", "Peep Show" plays with this echoing viewer intimacy: looking out from a stage so dark it is imperceptible, a figure stands in a viewing booth, face blurry and covered. There's possibly another figure to the right; they're eaten up by the screen and the photograph, remaining protected viewers, not subjects. *The Purple Room* has an affinity with the aesthetic qualities and residue-like operation of Gillespie's project, but those present confront the camera less. Ghostly forms in mirrors and shadows, blurred faces and bodies in low light and low angles are like a drunken flashback, ambiguous representations of what may or may not have unfolded. Some seem as if drawn from smoke.

While Hamill's use of grey obfuscates, the warming red cast is this imagery punctuates and pulls together León's work: light bonds these intimate, welcoming spaces of parties, friend's homes and his grandmother's house. I imagine it bouncing off the walls of a real/not-real space of the (his) purple room. It celebrates and invites with its code, given some abstract space in the atmospheric "Birth" and "Shadows". It also has a quiet redolence of historical painting, playing with that possibility and that sort of codification. Flattening yellow streetlight reflects on a wet, bare back exposed to the empty street; like an uncharacteristically subtle baroque scene, "Ablutions" works in this otherworldly and othertimely state. "Sevda in her bed" lies prone but modest as a quintessential reclining nude, surrounded by soft furnishings, a mirror headboard, and bright overhead light. Much of *The Purple Room* is dark, street lit or dream-like, as if they are mental projections oblivious to being seen. Aside from the eye drawn in a steamed-up window, she is the only person in full light who acknowledges and returns our gaze.

Looking "through" an image at a viewer might be a fallacy, yet so is the idea of the gaze returned by a living person in front of you. It is not simply a case of being out-of-step in place and time via the camera, but an act of projection that we can actually admit to. Intimacy's imprecision is catalysing; the wish for reciprocity and subconscious hope, the concurrent belief and the possible lack, lending it charge. Outside of the separating force of the image, intimacy, then, is dependent on and interlaces with its semi-conscious affirmation and forms of vulnerability between friends, lovers, and/or strangers.

Rachel Glass's *Abstract Negotiations of Intimacy* explores attempts to make up for the loss of such affirmation. Focusing on touch's currency (and implicit qualities palpable in its loss), Glass treats it as a primary sense from which others follow, an interior/exterior boundary to the self. *Abstract Negotiations* looks toward conscious attempts to remedy isolation from touch. As with *This Hurts*, there is the hope and pain of performance, but with vulnerable, tentative unfamiliarity. In light of the all-encompassing modern conditions that foster this particular loneliness, in this symptom-focused treatment, connection appears uncanny. Some

photos of this sensory therapy could be stock images in a medical pamphlet: in consciously acknowledging and seeking to address an implicit human desire, identity seems to recede from view. Mask-like, protective expressions are worn, aware and possibly for the sake of the camera; disembodied limbs are ambiguous enough to be prosthetic. Those limbs are, in one image, physically concealed from an owner as touch is performed, curtained like a caesarean or a sacrament. Interiors and light are subtly medical; that is, not deliberately clinical, but just uncomfortable enough to keep a paradoxical distance and assert a pathology. It is as if the limbs in contact are feigning a localised sensation.

This clinical imagery has a similar detail-focused, surveying quality to Hamill's *A Map*, but is its inverse in result; I am left with a disorienting feeling of second-hand loneliness and disconnection from people, time and place. Even from a distance these disembodied touches linger. It is only in the people-less imagery—pummelled clay on a plinth, a poised, threaded needle above a grid—that relief is found in similar ghostly sensations. My brain self-soothes with these aftermath images, unexpectedly feeling an empathetic clammy coolth in the fingers and scratch down the arm as a tonic. The touchless medium of photography echoes the void across which touch deprivation sits, yet becomes a means of a self-generating bodily sensation. In this way *Abstract Negotiations* enters into this world of therapeutic residues as a process in itself.

The somewhat transactional nature of this mutual fulfilment puts physical and physiological effects front and centre, yet in much of our lives the intimacy is framed as a natural aftereffect that simply seeps into life. This is somewhat ideological, framing “normal” forms of experiencing and communicating intimacy, as well as certain relationships, as natural and correct; alternatives are easily dismissed or overlooked. Much of how we fit around one another's lives, what we offer up of ourselves for others to see, or whether we open up to a state of intimacy, is contingent on projected futures together and the hierarchies at play. As such, certain work and relationships are paid little attention through their prescribed worth or out-of-timeness; readying space, such as in cleaning or construction, is seen as secondary to the “real” purpose of a location, stage-setting for the more valued times in the environment.

David O'Mara's *If You Can Piss* shows the little-recorded labour and fraternity on worksites from his career in painting and decorating. These images mark the transitional, ephemeral spaces that are his long-term workplace, the aesthetic chaos of the blended sites and the people whose work and dynamic become intrinsic to the space. Feet dangling from floors and lower bodies emerging from fireplaces evoke this incorporation and invisibility; “Geez and Julian looking out a window” in close mirror-image makes a comfortable, symmetrical, dis-identified form. The ease between the men collaborating, resting, talking at work is contrasted with moments of exhaustion, with the limits of the body framed by the constructions which house them and change to them.

The choice of black and white simplifies and dramatises light, makes these scenes a bit more unfamiliar, but as with León's work, also makes reference to fine art conventions. "Client's upended sofa" turns furniture into a plinth or totem, or could easily be a flash sculpture in another context. The black and white evokes cinematic, dress-setting qualities at times, in a billowing curtain and a wallpaper scraper on a bedside table. This choice, however, does not romanticise. The fact we never see photos of the painters at work (and so without O'Mara's labour) is telling. This, the single lens, and a snapped, unposed quality shows photography is happening around the work; dynamics of work's worth and pulling weight are felt in the fact these images even exist.

This being said, *If You Can Piss* has hints of involvement that suggest O'Mara's photography is not merely tolerated on site but is a means for more camaraderie; one can imagine a phone held up, hands offered or a comedy shirt might have been invited as images. These photos are a part of the banter that threads through their working dynamic; as Geez gives an arch look to the camera, arms folded as he lounges with a colleague at rest on a shrouded bed, you can sense him ribbing the artist with his eyes.

Photographs have long punctuated relationships; long been means to evidence life (and evoke a little bit of death). As dynamics of image-making leave photographs in their wake, the photo is intimacy instead of residual, given that no-one can quite manage to perfectly control it in these dialogues; staging becomes a gestalt, or only goes so far. Megan Doherty's mix of staging and documentation in the *Stoned in Melanchol* series uses photography as an act of care: moving in and out of construction, yet having the dream-like experience of a non-linear dusk-until-dawn, it shares the undercurrent of uncertainty and frustration the artist was communally feeling in her wider circle, not holding anyone to, again, that broken idea of individual representation.

As with Gillespie's *This Hurts*, identity feels like a fluid space in this series, seeping into domestic and liminal settings where they can be activated or challenged in steadfastness and security. Despite this fluidity, the implacable time and space of *Stoned in Melanchol* seems to make every image like a discrete moment in a dreamlike, hedonistic, somewhat stultifying place. On looking I feel sickness and disinterest with linear answers as to why. Desire exists in the same places that are heavy with its sublimation, and Doherty's photography is something like cinematography where these meet: in this series, the booze aisle of Tesco's, or a busy road out of town on foot at late dusk or early dawn. "Cherry Skins" is glamour and noir, with its burst of side-light, wigs and lowered sunglasses, with kitchen windows and a washing machine just out of view. There are perhaps suggestions of half-formed dreams and tried-on futures, but under no illusions.

I return again and again to images of who I assume to be the same two blonde women, identifiable beyond hair colour through their striking ease of care. Their dark, almost imperceptible forms merge on a petrol station forecourt in "Midnight Coffee" in a similar

embracing pose as “Blondes”; there are no faces but reading and tucked hair in “Girls” public toilet. They seem so connected that their individual presence elsewhere almost completely passes me by. No-one seems possible to exist without the other, would not be the same without the other. This is perhaps the crux of intimacy: knowing you can’t know it, or yourself, outside of it, makes it beyond sense, presence or self-containment. This is how it remains potent and reincarnated in its evasive, complex, unpinnable renderings; it is our shape-shifting, enveloping, multi-dimensional ghost.