



MORWENNA GRACE KEARSLEY

NOTCH CODE

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BY APPOINTMENT
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August

'I love borders. August is the border between summer and autumn; it is the most beautiful month I know. Twilight is the border between day and night, and the shore is the border between sea and land. The border is longing: when both have fallen in love but still haven't said anything. The border is to be on the way. It is the way that is the most important thing.'

Tove Jansson

Morwenna Kearsley's new body of work foregrounds the border between the field of the physical photographic negative and the black border that surrounds her images. Across her new series of still life photographs she prints the full frame of the large format negative as a contact print, physically placing the negative in direct contact with the photographic paper. The negative and the print, are brought into direct dialogue, one a direct reversal of the other - a picture that 'makes itself'. She includes the sharp black frame of the negative, the identifying notches on the top left edge along with any incidental scratches, light burns and dust in the final print.

As such she invites us into the making of the work, pulls back the curtain, allowing the physical realities of the developmental process to cross over into the final print. The manner in which the film was loaded, the conditions of her working environment on that day, at that particular moment in time are imprinted in the negative, translated into a series of gestural marks; indexical records of the physical interaction of artist and material as the film is unloaded, processed, held and manoeuvred.

It is this 'here and now' that Morwenna is allowing us to be part of, inviting us into the studio set up where the work was photographed, where her iphone torch illuminated and circled the modern detritus and artefacts she records in her still life images. There's generosity and honesty in this action; an openness to circumstance, chance, to the imperfections of life, to the beauty of the unexpected.

Richard Avedon, too, included the black frame of his negatives in his photographs, thinking of this border as a 'proscenium arch', the frame of the theatrical stage as defined by floor, sides and roof; the metaphorical plane where the performance occurs. In place of the wood, fabric, pulleys and plaster of the theatrical stage we see the sharply defined edges of his celluloid negatives. The frame of his portrait photographs, with shadowless uniform white background, highlights the theatrical auto-performance inherent in his genre. Avedon's proscenium arch confirms his impeccable skills of framing and technique, but reminds us that what we are seeing is only real for the split second in time of his camera shutter.

If there's a theatricality to Morwenna's images then it's of a very different ilk. Her objects, too, are actors performing on a stage. Rather than human subjects they are objects presented in isolation against dark velvet. Object-actors speaking a soliloquy beyond the curtain. Bubble wrap, phone cases, sound proofing foam; the matter

which surrounds us, which we fail to notice or care for. These are her performers. But what are they telling us?

We must listen carefully for they speak in whispers...

Wassily Kandinsky: 'Everything that is dead quivers. Not only the things of poetry, stars, moon, wood, flowers, but even a white trouser button glittering out of a puddle in the street... Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks.'

If her proscenium arches prick the fourth wall, bring us into the world of their making, then what surrounds their borders? Morwenna's prints are framed by a slim border of blackness. An emptiness produced by light particles reacting with paper and chemicals. A portrait of thin air. A border left to chance, to give space to the image itself, to allow it to breathe.

In 'Detachment' Michel Serres writes in praise of the boundaries at the edges of fields, the areas left untilled and uncultivated, untouched by reason and logic:

'A touch of irrationality is the saving grace for us, a stroke of luck which gives us some breathing space, a loose fit in the machine which makes us alive. Life, intelligence, goodness probably came out of this free play and this lack of restraint. Leave some ears of wheat in the field for the gleaners. Perhaps we shall learn one day that the most reliable machines leave room for the unexpected.'

Morwenna leaves room for the unexpected in her new body of work, acknowledging the autonomy of her materials and processes, giving them and us space to breathe, to think, to be.

Lorna Macintyre, August 2021

Endnotes

Walter Benjamin: 'the viewer of the photograph feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now'

Short History of Photography, Walter Benjamin, 1931

William Henry Fox Talbot: 'it is not the artist who makes the picture but the picture which makes itself.'

quoted in *William Henry Fox Talbot*, Geoffrey Batchen, Phaidon, 2008

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