

Of Change & Loss: Orchard Park & Lost Horizons.

An Essay on the Photography of Andy Lock:
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Stewart Collinson 2008

In each of his two most recent series of photographs, *Orchard Park* and *Lost Horizons*, Andy Lock explores marginal and forgotten spaces, but approaches them with opposing strategies to evoke quite different reactions.

Orchard Park, the earlier of the two works, articulates absence, specifically the lack of human presence, through the depiction of furniture and artefacts, abandoned in once occupied, once homely, domestic spaces. There is a poignancy to the “aesthetic decay” of this work. An aesthetic decay which is predicated upon a literal process of decay, of light fading, one achieved through the use of phosphorescent paint on which a colour slide has been projected, to form the images. The result, Alison Nordstrom notes, is 'magical, unsettling and open to a variety of interpretations.' She says of the singular process used to create the images, that it 'takes something static – an empty room – renders it as something moving – the slowly degrading projected image – and then, photographically stops it at some decisive moment before it disappears.'¹ The absence in these images is palpable. It speaks to and resonates with our own narratives of change and loss.

Whereas the photographs of Orchard Park return the gaze of the viewer with spatial indices of absence, the Lost Horizons photographs by contrast puncture the reverie of the forgetting spaces they depict with the presence of a small detail, consciously placed.

In Lost Horizons Lock engages the viewer through the play of memory and the memory of play. In childhood we assemble groups and communities of such animal figures as those depicted and enact their imaginary lives, or project our own onto them and in doing so, we elide the ambivalence and paradoxes of our relationship to the natural. The little creatures of

¹ Alison Nordstrom writing in *Orchard Park*, ed. Anne McNeill, Impress, 2006

Lost Horizons are not especially cute. “Cute” is one of the ways in which humans visually mediate the world. It is, perhaps, the most mediated the world can be, for it is rendered ultimately knowable, vulnerable and safe, thereby eliciting empathy. “Cute” is a displaced re-articulation of instinctual nurturing, identified by ethologist Konrad Lorenz, as necessary for survival. The upward, imploring gaze of large dilated pupils is the embodiment of "cute". Mostly though, the figures in Lost Horizons gaze away from us, into the depths of spaces: they do not engage us with their eyes.

We might consider the significance of these 'depths of spaces' and the figures that populate them a little further. “At the heart of Kant’s aesthetic”, writes Mary Midgley, “is his attempt to understand the sublime as those things that impress us, not by being what we already want (the beautiful) but by their vastness and total disregard for our needs, in a word, by their absolute Otherness. Mountains are sublime... So even, are very small things if they are exceedingly strange and unaccountable”²

Lost Horizons explores the sublime through the absurd. There is a contemporary discourse of the ridiculous sublime in the work of philosopher Slavoj Zizek. In Zizek’s re-reading of Hegel, “an idea about something is always disrupted by a discrepancy and this discrepancy is necessary for the idea to exist in the first place”³. We see this at work in the photographs of Lost Horizons: the images communicate profundity out of the profane and the quotidian; the presence of the figures disrupting the spaces they inhabit.

The defining mood of the age we live in, the zeitgeist, is uncertainty, (as if it is ever anything else). The grand renaissance and enlightenment aspirations, manifested in the ideologies and cultures of their times have been superseded by a disillusionment in the very notion of aspiration; to become better, greater, higher. The solitary figures in Lock's images comment ironically on these aspirations. In the image, “Rusty Dog on Tabletop” there is an oblique

² Midgley M. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Routledge. London 1979

³ Myers T. Slavoj Zizek. Routledge London 2003

reference to Caspar David Friedrich's "*The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*".⁴ The figures depicted in *Lost Horizons* stand and gaze, seeking meaning, but any hope of elucidation or clarity is returned by obscure backgrounds and voids, which recede obliquely beyond the frame: nothing with any substance of certainty is revealed.

By replacing a heroic, romantic human figure with small discarded model animals, "things that are poor facsimiles of things, insubstantial things" (as Lock himself, describes the figures), this series articulates the contemporary condition; the disorientation resulting from illusory certainty falling away, the acceptance of contradiction as the ground of our being in the world. In these absurd, ridiculous tableaux, the isolation of the figures in the presence of voids speaks precisely of lost horizons.

The little creatures, gazing into liminal space, seem to say "what now, where now?" And we can't answer because we don't know.

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⁴ a reference first suggested by Clare Charnley