

In the twinkling of an eye
by Katie Paine

*A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.*¹

These are the words French critic Roland Barthes uses in his mournful observations of the philosophies of photography in his 1980 book *Camera Lucida*, to describe the complex relationship between the subject of a photograph, the material nature of the image itself, and those that look upon it. I have always been interested in the ways in which we rely on images to act as evidence of events, as a form of mnemonic prosthesis – as if with no image to record it, memory becomes completely fallible.² Barthes goes on to discuss photography's role in verifying moments in time when he articulates "in Photography I can never deny *that the thing has been there.*"³

These temporal and phenomenological relationships between image, viewer and subject become explicit within certain images. On my fridge, an image of my sister and I as children smiling giddily at the camera. On my coffee table lies a sleek glossy photograph of a celebrity in a magazine. As I swipe along the glassy surface of my phone, I stumble upon the horror of a body mangled and dusty, beneath the rubble of a building. The chubby folds of my sister's infant hands clutching mine, the theatrical patina of cosmetics daubed on an actor's cheek and the obliteration of a city, cloaked in dust, crystalises into immediacy. These are traces of occurrences, the quotidian and domestic, the cataclysmic and the global, all made tangible before my eyes. The photographic image carves a tear in time and space; as I look, I feel I am transported to decades past or cities across vast oceans.

The exhibitions for *Seeing In* at Bus Projects do not present images that package up their content so clearly. These are what I think of as fugitive images that retreat stubbornly as I attempt to decipher them. I cannot easily determine when an image was taken, what it purports to portray or if it portrays an existing thing at all, or some deceptive composite or orchestrated replica. What happens then, within photography's indexical trace-relationship, when that which is imaged is unclear, abstract, or unrecognisable? What happens when you are given the 'trace' of something that you cannot decipher? This is a murky territory, one that cannot be navigated so easily through a semiotic rubric. Each project for *Seeing In* considers such tenuous realms of image-making by contemplating expanded methods of darkroom photography and digital image production.

¹Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Random House, 1993.

²"To a very large extent, in the last 150 years we have begun to see, define and know our world through the medium of photograph." J Brown, J Wood, E Powell, "Forward", *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography*. Washington: National Gallery of Art Publishing, 1989.

³Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1993.

Nina Gilbert's video *Condensation* broadcasts a series of splintered moments drenched in rosy, pink, diffused light. I am reminded of the seconds after waking when the sun streams through my window and as I blink, everything is rendered in a flushed glare that drowns all that I look upon. The tall rafters of a ceiling are lit like a stage, the light cast flattens the room like the set of a German Expressionist film. In this video, the gaze is always guided to a central image, yet certain details remain perpetually out of reach. I think of Noir detectives: Jack Nicholson's furtive gaze through the Venetian blinds of his office window in Roman Polanski's *China Town*⁴ or Mrs de Winter wandering twisted corridors in Hitchcock's *Rebecca*⁵. These are scanned photographs, their intimate details blown up large to adapt to their transfiguration by the incandescent glow of a projector's ray. A flatbed scanner uses a beam of white light to optically sweep the surface of a physical image. It scrutinises every infinitesimally minute gradation of colour and light and synthesises it, mimicking each tone to retrieve a digital simulacrum. When I was a child, I remember watching my parents feed images into a scanner. I loved watching the light slide across the surface of the image in rhythmic formations, back and forth, like a lighthouse's beacon slicing through the night sky. I was always left surprised when the original material remained intact. I had assumed the surface of the image would be nullified somehow; wiped clean or swept away only to materialise inside a monitor. In Australian author Gail Jones' novel *60 Lights*, the protagonist describes her first experiences with nineteenth century photography: 'she looked as she never had, imagining a picture frame or a box that isolated the continuous and unceasing flux of things into clear aesthetic units, into achieved moments of observation.'⁶ The images presented in Gilbert's *Condensation* may offer a collection of discrete framed images but they are anything but clear or isolated, they coalesce into a web of puzzling narratives.

I return to the aesthetics of the detective when encountering the jewelled tones of Elena Misso's installation *Overnight, or very quietly*. A cascade of darkroom prints are hung throughout the gallery. At times, images are draped over one another, obscuring those beneath. These images were perhaps once identifiable, but they have now been utterly deconstructed. Some are sliced into long strips and reassembled into feathery clusters, each fragment interrupting the one that came before. I think of the long-held cinematic trope of a photographer unwittingly capturing a crucial event during a crime or some other dramatic incident. There is always a disturbing moment of realisation in the darkroom when this surprising visual evidence crystallises on a sheet of paper lying on the surface of an acrid-smelling bath. The incident is then pieced together as the photographer strings up image after image to dry: a series of little inky apparitions. If Misso is also an observer navigating an occurrence, it must be a strange one. Undulating waves of red and green, clusters of ordered dots like inscrutable cyphers with hidden messages.

Misso's installation renders everyday surfaces and textures strange and uncanny. As with Gilbert's *Condensation*, once more, I am reminded of German Expressionism, the bright

⁴ *China Town*, directed by Roman Polanski (1974; Los Angeles, Paramount Pictures).

⁵ *Rebecca*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1940; Los Angeles, United Artists).

⁶ Gail Jones, *60 Lights*, London: Harville Press, 2004.

tones of Emil Nolde's laughing faces in the painting *Masks*⁷, or the hand-coloured movie posters for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*⁸. The majority of images Misso presents us with are abstract, but from time-to-time recognisable fragments make themselves known. A ubiquitous utopian landscape: a glade of trees, rolling hills and towering mountains reflected in a glassy lake becomes extra-terrestrial through a treatment of colour. Infinite variations of bright, acidic mustard, uranium green, magenta, sparks of blue light: colours so vivid they seem other worldly. Perhaps instead they can be likened to luminous microcosmic landscapes of cells on a plane of glass, or the bright cosmic swirls of telescopic images – maybe these images were cast by the passage of light journeying across millennia, refracted by a mirrored lens.

In the room neighbouring Misso's incandescent network of images lies Aaron Rees' installation *POP*. Structured like the clinical environment of a post-production studio, photographic prints hang loosely on sleek white racks, an environment within which Rees considers the elusive nature of imaging and the illusory world of image 'finishing'. Displayed in this way, the photographs are identified as both precious and precarious.

Upon the taller rack lies a roll of paper, its surface obscured. I contort myself to peer downwards at an oblique angle. Echoing the vignette of a single eye in Gilbert's *Condensation*, here lies a monochromatic print of an iris. Dense lashes, lids smattered with threadlike blood vessels, all appear contorted by the arc of the paper. It is like looking into an inverted anamorphic mirror. Upon closer inspection, the photograph of the eye is marred by aberrations, strange silvery tendrils that crawl across the page. These wavering phantasmagorical marks are also known as 'eye floaters', small skeins of collagen that build up within the eye and cast shadows or create speckled lacunae that mar the visual field. The allusion to floaters conjures a sense of delirium, it speaks of the eye's own capacity to tell us fanciful and treacherous stories. Rees' practice has long considered the biological mechanisms of seeing, the eye's perceptual apparatuses and the mind's attempt to translate that which it absorbs. Medieval society maintained an ancient Greek notion that the eye did not glean light and colour from the outside world to achieve vision. 5th Century BCE Philosopher Empedocles believed the eye, nestled into the bony orb of the skull, was a lantern casting outward a fiery light that illuminated the world.⁹ This notion, whilst appearing strange and mystical compared with contemporary optical knowledge, articulates something of the perplexing and magical nature of image-making and the viewing of images. Rees' practice acknowledges that vision allows us to make sense of the world and ponders the moment when vision shifts and recalibrates. All of a sudden, we no longer understand.

Framed images span the gallery walls. A dark desaturated cloudy sky, a strange and sombre sun that seems to be bereft of warmth, like an eclipse has taken place, a kind of eternal night. Nearby, an image of the ocean's horizon is interrupted by a carbon black orb, like the stony aperture of a camera, or the core of an event horizon hurtling towards the foreground, ready

⁷ Emil Nolde, *Masks*, 1911, Oil on Canvas, 73.03 x 77.47 cm, Google Arts and Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/masks-emil-nolde/lwH99YwnXFxYBQ>

⁸ *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang (1927; Berlin, Parufamet).

⁹ "The Eye", presented by Melvin Bragg, *In Our Time*, aired 27th February 2014, on BBC Radio 4.

to devour its surroundings. Upon the second shelf, laid under glass, lie a series of three vivid prints. From the corner of my eye, they look like poppies strewn across a verdant field, yet the more that I gaze at them I realise that this may be a ruse. The photos are ultimately abstract and aloof. They mimic the distribution of colour I expect from such an image and so my mind wills this image into being, regardless of the evidence before me. These images are immaculately stacked in piles, each one sliced and scored with a series of shapes that mimic optical diagrams or maps of light spectra.

Each component of *Seeing In* has an element of unease, an anxiety arises when realising that images may seduce and deceive us. This disruption of semiotic order, of the temporality of the photographic trace, brings with it a sense discomfort. These images bring our attention to amorphous, fuzzy territories right at the edges of our field of vision. Swedish academic Mikael Pettersson discusses such occurrences in his essay *Depictive Traces*, referring to philosopher Husserl's notion of a "perceptual explosion", a schismatic moment that accompanies "certain shifts in the interpretation of our perception."¹⁰ 'Explosion' is a very decided term that evokes vivid images of ruptures and moments of disastrous force. *Seeing In* may correspond with the viewer in gentler ways and yet it does raise an awareness of the unnerving mechanisms of sight and of perceptual shifts. It feels strange to reflect on instantaneous bodily process like sight, interior, instinctive actions I often take for granted. *Seeing In* complicates the notion of the photographic trace, but in doing so demands that we acutely reflect on the act of looking, both conceptually and biologically, to contemplate its many semiotic, political, or representational possibilities.

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¹⁰ Mikael Pettersson, "Deceptive Traces", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 69:2 (Spring, (2011): 185, <https://academic.oup.com/jaac/article/69/2/185/5980140>.