

ECOTOPIA

Joanna Lehan

Interview with Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin conducted by Joanna Lehan, assistant curator at the International Center of Photography, New York for the catalogue of ECOTOPIA, the second triennial of photography and video. 2006 **JL: How do you characterize your photographic style? What has influenced your visual approach?**

B&C: We use a large format camera that's cumbersome and slow to use. Each sheet of film is expensive. These limitations help to make the process of taking photographs more reflective and considered.

Working together in a team is significant. We tend to conceptualise our ideas before taking our photographs. Each image is the result of a conversation, a process of research and discussion. There are a million decisions that are taken along the way and because we work together this decision making process has to be more self-conscious. When it comes to actually taking a photograph, the clicking of the shutter becomes almost immaterial.

This is not in the least bit contentious in the realm of fine art. But it sits uncomfortably with the mythology of the lone, photojournalist, responding to events in the world and recording reality. We are suspicious of this idea and our photographic style has developed out of an interest in these problems that representation presents.

For example, the process of making portraiture is inevitably rotten. We can easily just replace the role of photographer with the author in Janet Malcolm's brilliant analysis of the subject - author relationship in "The Journalist and the Murderer", in which she argues that "Every journalist (read photographer) who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible.... He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness." The camera wields a strange sense of authority. Over and over again we have seen a sense of naïve trust that subjects seem to feel in the presence of a camera. We are aware of this moral impasse and we try to make our work with this struggle in mind.

Our influences have often been more literary rather than photographic. Ryszard Kapuscinski was a huge influence; his personal and idiosyncratic descriptions of political conflicts and the way he would isolate a single moment or intimately describe one person whose story became emblematic of an otherwise unfathomable and often too distant situation.

Looking through Chicago, our most recent body of work, it would be difficult to characterize one single photographic style. The book comprises of landscapes, architectural documentation, still lives and details. There are varying and conflicting aesthetic conventions that we have applied to convey

specific ideas. For example, in our Forest Series we document pine forest in Israel that, since 1948, were systematically planted over the ruins of evacuated Arab towns. These forests look natural, as if they have been standing there forever. Our strategy here is to photograph the forests at the crack of dawn so the quality of light reinforces the feeling of harmless beauty, the myth of nature. Here we have appropriated conventions used in landscape painting, including the notion of the sublime and the picturesque. We wanted to show how the state of Israel has used these conventions, consciously or not, to stage or design a landscape that felt timeless and innocent, a landscape that would not only physically erase a recent violent history but would also suggest a natural and legitimate space. The forests seems to say that if anything evil exists here it must be in your imagination or subconscious.

For the series of suicide bombs we employed different aesthetic conventions. We photographed the bombs isolated against a white backdrop. This anthropological approach suggests that they are precious objects, emphasising the fact that they are lovingly crafted objects. We wanted to talk about the level of obsessive care that the Israeli police had obviously taken in recreating them which describes the level of co-dependence that this endless conflict has created between Israelis and Palestinians.

JL: At a recent Aperture panel talk about the book to which you contributed "Things as They Are," there seem to be a contingency that was uncomfortable with you presenting your work in the context of photojournalism—though you yourselves do not claim the label. What do you think made some in the audience uncomfortable, and how does your photographic position differ from theirs?

B&C: During the Aperture event one photojournalist in the audience stood up and announced that he's "just a shooter." He objected to what he described as "all these words". This photographer just goes out there and takes pictures. The audience applauded. Our strategy has evolved in opposition to "the shooter" approach.

The days of the adrenaline fueled, male war photographer bringing back the news from the frontline, are over. Photography is no longer the primary source of news information. And the idea that these images offer viewers an objective truth, is obsolete.

Even more worrying, is it possible that the presence of photojournalists on the frontline and the images they produce create a kind of consensus; that the photojournalistic profession has become part of the industry of war. As Sontag says, "War-making and picture-taking are congruent activities..." Photographs of war or disaster scenes have become familiar. Almost inevitable. They punctuate our daily lives in the form of safe images framed and caged by the newspaper. But what is the use of these images? Are we revolted by anything anymore? Are they a call to action? It feels like they are actually enjoyable, they are a kind of entertainment, that there is an element of catharsis about looking at a gruesome scene that is taking place at a safe distance in the morning newspaper. We open the paper expecting and

desiring something horrific.

Crucially, for traditional photojournalism, is the fact that the three biggest news stories in recent years, September 11th, Abu Graib and the Tsunami, were all recorded by amateurs. Chris Boot made the joke during the Aperture discussion that these days if your photographs aren't good enough, you aren't far enough away. An inversion of Capa's famous quote. This strategy, of stepping back from the event and producing more reflective journalism, is a direct response to this new reality; that armed with a digital camera or a mobile phone everyone is a photojournalist, in the traditional sense, reporting from the front line of life.

Another thing that people felt uncomfortable with is the stress we put on context. We often present a picture with words. A photograph is too unstable a language to think it can clearly communicate the same thing all over the world without being contextualised. **JL: How would you typify the stories that are of greatest interest to you?**

B&C: Increasingly personal ones. Initially we kind of followed, to quote Janet Malcolm again, "...the camera's profound misanthropy, its willingness to go to unpleasant places where no one wants to venture, its nasty preference for precisely those facets of our nature that we most wish to disown..." We followed it into the darkest margins. We spent years going from refugee camps to maximum security prisons, to psychiatric hospitals. Now we follow concerns that are more personal. This last book on Israel has a more personal motivation. We are both Jewish, have family in Israel, and feel echoes of our experience of apartheid South Africa in the place. It feels relevant, personal and urgent.

JL: Do you see yourselves as activists, or your pictures a form of activism?

B&C: Photography is an efficient space in which to act, a language with a vocabulary that is relatively easy to master and reproduce and with which you can infiltrate many different public spaces, from newspapers to the reserved walls of galleries. If you are nimble you can use the vocabulary and the contexts to communicate different things to many different people. **JL: You described the woods in your Forest series as a political construction. Do you think it's possible to make a landscape photo in Israel that is NOT political? Can you imagine anywhere that you could do so, or is all landscape politicized at this point in history?**

B&C: No, of course all land and all landscape is political and our understanding of it and even our understanding of beauty is informed by various political agendas. What we are saying is that the way Israel presents and packages itself is a particularly potent examples of this. Landscape is presented as innocent and natural, and this suits a particular political discourse. Settlers living in the illegal settlements in the West Bank are enticed by a combination of tax incentives and cheap housing with easy access to Jerusalem. But mostly they are offered a stunning view of a pastoral, unblemished Holy Land, devoid of an Arab population. These people are on

the frontline of a war, they overlook a landscape that bears scars of this war, of excavation and displacement and yet it appears and is sold as this innocent and harmless landscape, a cartoon of the Holy Land that you can navigate with the bible as a guide book.