

review

Virtue and Vice

Derivations of Allegory in Contemporary Photography

Site Gallery, Sheffield 11th March–10th May

'Allegory means 'other speech' (*alia oratio*), from *allos*, other, and *agoreuein*, to speak openly; it signifies an open declamatory speech which contains another layer of meaning.'¹

The connection between words and pictures has been prominent in western art since the European Renaissance. The Church used symbolism in Religious Art, with the intention for an interpretation by all. This was based on the notion of universal references and the power of propaganda. At the same time, the Neo-Platonic educated minority of the Italian Renaissance used visual allegory to open a range of interpretations, only fully legible by the cultured elite.

The evolution of photography has seen a progression in the autonomous form of image-making. Over the last hundred years, visual language has evolved and the mass saturation of images has been complicated by 'the fact that less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality', therefore, 'something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, something set up' in order for it to relate within contemporary society.²

The theory of allegory is concerned with centrally placed objects, persons or personifications intending to represent one thought by way of another. These thoughts open many dimensions. The substance of photographic allegories consist of visual images which encompass an entire entity of a concept and is more than just the reinterpretation of words. The surrealist artists pioneered the concept of creative and constructive photography, yet, allegory has been largely suppressed in modern creative practise. This is redressed in the exhibition *Virtue and Vice* at the Site Gallery in Sheffield. The show includes work from Helen Chadwick, Sorel Cohen, Karen Knorr, Dany Leriche, Paloma Navares, Bernhard Prinz and Olivier Richon.

The work shown in *Virtue and Vice* slips neatly into several categories. Sorel Cohen, Karen Knorr and Paloma Navares explore issues within feminist critical practice. Bernhard Prinz and Dany Leriche demystify the notion of the human form as cultural language. Olivier Richon's concepts derive from historical and literary sources which are then transformed into philosophical and rhetorical statements. Helen Chadwick uses 17th and 18th century allegorical symbols and produces ambiguous compositions that re-present allegory in contemporary photographically based work.

Within these texts, the relationship with a painterly language is always apparent. These constructed images revel in stillness. The compositions are quiescent, captured by the camera prompting an awareness of the optical unconscious with the business of technology recording a segment of time. Yet, the content of the work is firmly based in an established allegorical aesthetic.

The act of looking at an image, which by its very nature is open to alternative readings, is one which can be daunting. It plays on the insecurities of understanding and can be compared to seeing an actual photograph for the very first time. The photographer Karl Dauthendey comments on one of the first forms of photography, the daguerreotype: 'People were afraid at first, to look for any length of time at the pictures (he) produced. They were embarrassed by the clarity of these figures and believed that the little, tiny faces of the people in the pictures could see out at them, so amazing did the unaccustomed detail and the unaccustomed truth to nature of the first daguerreotype pictures appear to everyone'.³

The digitally produced photo-work *Isabelle et Dominique* (1995) by French artist Dany Leriche contains a literal search for truth. Leriche has referred to Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533) which acts simultaneously as a double portrait and a memento mori containing a skull in the foreground that only comes into perspective when seen from an angle. In this contemporary reworking, as well as questioning gene manipulation and atomic energy, Leriche has also included a life-size model of a human skull in the form of a digital 3D illusion. This 3D image is supposed to act as a reminder that there are other ways of seeing the world and other dimensions existing within this one. This actual physical 'allegory' has, for myself, posed the question as to whether I can really see the skull image or not and if I cannot see the 3D illusion, am I effectively excluded from the work?

The exhibition at the Site Gallery opened with a conference aptly titled, "I Can't Explain it all Myself". Speakers included Fred Orton, Rosemary Betterton, Karen Knorr, Dany Leriche, Bernhard Prinz and Olivier Richon. The conference aimed to investigate further the notion of allegory in current photographic practise and in doing so, opened up an arena for conceptual conjecture. One of the issues which was questioned was the relationship between form and content. The concept of ideal forms and forms of reality: ideas and images, sign and text. According to Olivier Richon, allegory has 'hidden intentions' in contrast to symbol, which is seen as 'pure and traditionally opens the area of aesthetics'.⁴

Symbol in photography is viewed for itself and for an immediate emotive sensational response. Allegory, then, is a perversion of symbol, a conceptual remote unemotional commentary. Yet, by the very nature of photography, symbol is always present. Olivier Richon's *The Academy* (1995) is a parody of Cesare Ripa's 16th century book. The six-part series includes animal and vegetable objects in a bizarre twist on the theme of still-life, placing it within the discourses of art and art history while exploring the visual statement and its values. An object as symbol, however, will always be viewed as an object, and as part of a composition an object can also be used to represent allegorical meanings.

Angus Fletcher commenting on allegory has suggested that 'while allegorical intention is usually under a high degree of authorial control, means are available whereby the controlling rigours are softened or the simplifying effects of control are counteracted by various devices of complication, chief of which is an ironical gaze turned in upon the work itself'.⁵ This depends on a common system of reference, with the viewer actively engaged in decoding the signs as the site of questioning. It is a rendition from the visual experience to the textual experience and by drawing our own interpretations, variability is increased as well as the aesthetic value of the allegory.

Gay Clifford expresses in his book *Transformations of Allegory* (1974 Routledge) that the very labour of

working things out is a part of the pleasure. This is also based on an assumption that an allegorist has access to an audience prepared to undertake the task, in a desire to know and understand. Mediaeval authors believed it was their function to assist moral speculation and decision through the allegorical interpretations of the Bible and they reached their audience from the pulpit. The Renaissance allegorists used the form in an aridly scholastic mode which was regulated by the literate and cultured elite. The ambiguity surrounding an allegorical style has bred condemnation and denunciation throughout history precisely for its apparent exclusion and substitute meanings.

So what place, if any, does allegory hold in contemporary photography? The works in the *Virtue and Vice* exhibition could be described as catering for a knowing audience, which to a certain extent, is true. Karen Knorr's series *Academies* (1994-95) comments on the status of women within the Royal Academy and follows a general theme which explores rigid ideas of the privileged elite of British Society. Knorr cleverly deconstructs the indulgence of this social and cultural class with such subtlety, the full extent of the irony can only really be appreciated by an 'informed' audience. That isn't to say, alternative readings can not be made. The beauty of allegory is it has no 'one' meaning. The concepts are continually evolving and it is flexible enough to be adapted into postmodernist society. Allegory's historic role in interpreting moral values is passing and is used today predominantly in advertising, placing hidden meanings upon products, with the ambiguity of the allegory revealing the true *Virtue and Vice* of the social norms and values of our times.

Visual images are vastly used as signifiers with constantly changing terms of reference which seem vacant and devoid of context. These images within today's mass media are easily consumable symbols. They are encountered quickly and are disregarded in the same way. A visual language has evolved in the consumer culture, containing stylised images and a generation of stereotypes. Bernhard Prinz invites the viewer to read his images in a 'blatant' allegorical way. Prinz's series: *Blessur* (1996) is the showcase of *Virtue and Vice* and is easily the most accessible work in the exhibition. The images are slick, seductive and have the feel of an advertisement campaign for Benetton or Gap. Prinz takes androgynous young figures and places them in classical portraiture poses. The theme of the series is appearance and skin surface combined with issues of contemporary codes and morality. His models are from the street and are chosen for their gesture and look. The images Prinz creates are blank canvas, so to speak, waiting for interpretations to be added by the viewer. The apathetic protagonists gaze out from the large-scale photographs; this is real life, this is allegory of the everyday.

This play with the attitudes of popular culture highlights a genuine issue in postmodern photographic discourse. Over a century ago at photography's conception, critic Antoine Wiertz proposed that 'When the daguerreotype, this giant-child has grown up, when all his skill and power has unfolded, then genius will suddenly seize him by the scruff of the neck and cry in a loud voice: ...Now you belong to me. We shall work together'.⁶

Has this 'giant-child' grown up? Is there a need to reinvent the language of photography in a more obscure form in reaction to the consumable images of the mass media? Could this language be the form and content of visual allegory, a tradition of Renaissance painting? Current photographic practise is suffused with derivations of this art historical concept. Contemporary photographers Cindy Sherman, Maude Salter, the late Robert Mapplethorpe and others working in the last decade, have openly used allegory in their work. The Surrealist movement and the Avant Guard incorporated allegorical terms throughout their practise. Perhaps this 'pulling back' of creativity in photography, at this point in time, is just a device in order to diversify the medium.

Within the tradition of historic visual allegory, the work of Dany Leriche, in the *Virtue and Vice* exhibi-



SOREL COHEN *The Body that Talks*

tion, fits closest to the mark. Leriche creates classical compositions using the likes of Holbein, Caravaggio, Ingres and Vermeer as starting points. The large format pale nudes present the female form, as seen by a woman, in a historical setting dealing with contemporary cultural issues. However, the transition from painting to photography changes the perception of these images. As a Renaissance painting, the secondary information acts as a periphery that encases the image from the truest sense of reality. The almost life-size prints by Leriche, force an unnatural truth upon the viewer which is so real, it becomes uncomfortable to view. Nudes in photography have, in the past, had an association with pornography, and the graphic depiction of the naked body in this work can be likened to that association, for the simple reason of realistic photographic representation. Leriche's work is never titillating or frivolous, yet the reality of the *nakedness* exposes questions of voyeurism, exploitation and morality.

Allegory as morality has all but disappeared in its present use. Contemporary photographic allegorists tend to use the idea of morality as a concept to work against. Many of the works in the exhibition feature exotic animals, alive, dead or preserved by taxidermy and Bernhard Prinz, in his series of photographs, includes a large format image of his infant son, an apparent virtue covered in the vice of chicken pox. Like a photograph, the artists in this exhibition have taken something temporary and frozen it in time and it is through inspecting the nature of these photographic objects that patterns and links can be established between them. The *Virtue and Vice* in this exhibition is viewed as a commentary on current social and political norms, of which morality is seen as being just as ambiguous as the allegorical meanings.

There is a strong sense of feminism throughout the exhibition, particularly within the work of Sorel Cohen, Karen Knorr and Paloma Navares. These artists question the representation of the female body in western iconography. The sources of the texts originate within a historical context and are then transformed into the present to personify feminism today. The female models presented by all of the artists in this exhibition are strong, somewhat melancholic liberated women. Cohen, in particular, recontextualises her photo-works by juxtaposing images for multiple visual allegoric readings. The series *The Body that Talks* (1996), is based on a psychoanalyst's couch and the panel that accompany the images are extracts from Freud's *Observations on Transference-Love* dating from 1915. The fact that Cohen herself visits a psychoanalyst, brings to the work an angle on the tangible void that exists between an artist's personal and prolific experience.

Marina Warner in her book *Monuments and Maidens* states that 'Meanings of all kinds flow through the figures of women, and they often do not include who she herself is.'⁷ This is true of all of the female figures represented in the exhibition *Virtue*

and *Vice*. Feminist critique is very conscious in the work and in the attempt to stage contemporary allegories in historical contexts results in a detachment which is evident in all the models, an ambivalent neutrality that prevails throughout, in order for a general validity to be imposed by an audience.

There is almost a clinical fascination with the logistics of the female body in this exhibition, a scientific exploration of the female form which results in an idolisation of women. This is apparent in the work of Paloma Navares whose installation *Light of hibernation* (1995) includes materials such as Plexiglass tube, fluorescent light, display cabinets and transparent plastics. More than anything, the female images represented in the exhibition intend to remember the female body that has been exploited for politics, propaganda and pleasure, and re-address the stereotyped opinions about the female form in western culture.

For American critic Craig Owens, allegory is 'something turned into something else ...one text read through another'.⁸ Indicating that photography as a medium pertains to a visual world removed from itself. This is eloquently displayed by all of the artists included in *Virtue and Vice* in a commentary that stresses interpretation and a particular mode of reading images which is found within the structure of an allegorical text. The embodiment of allegory without personification is present in the work of British artist Helen Chadwick's (1953-1996) contribution to the *Virtue and Vice* exhibition. Chadwick's triptych consisting of two *Wreaths to Pleasure 1 & 10* (1993) and *Mundo Positivo* (1995) explores substance, physical elements and the human body. Moreover, the use of ambiguity obscures typification. In this series of work, Chadwick's source material is expressive and unconventional. Blackberries, bath foam, flower petals and condensed liquids are formed into geometric patterns and photographed as cibachromes. The elements of opposition are always present in the work; repulsion and adoration, beauty and vulgarity, body and spirit. Again, Chadwick has frozen the organic and perishable and forced it into the realm of immortality combining metaphor with allegory. *Mundo Positivo*, itself, is a work based on raising awareness about the HIV virus and AIDS and therefore, is something turned into something else.

Photography is addressed and validated in *Virtue and Vice* as more than a specific practice, it questions the representation, rhetoric and aesthetic of an image. The photography presented is elevated to high art reminiscent of the masterly skill of great Renaissance art. The exhibition explores the relationship between photography and the object. The camera absorbs objects in order to make an image. As an image, these objects become analogical signs and as a sign the object has transcended what it was before and become something else or an allegorical *other*. Terry Eagleton, writing on allegory reminds us that the 'allegorical object has undergone a kind of haemorrhage of spirit: drained of all immanent meaning, it lies as a pure fac-

DANY LERICHE *Isobel et Dominique*

ticity under the manipulative hand of the allegorist, awaiting such meaning as he or she may imbue it with.'⁹

Virtue and Vice is a thematic exhibition following earlier exhibitions entitled *Hommages & Remakes* (1988), *Grotesque* (1989) and *Minimal Relics* (1992-1993). The contributors here are all working with different methods and agendas which reveal one constant: the same use of an art historical mode capable of subsuming many different genres and forms. An exhibition like this is a representation of the theoretical implications of our time. A comment on the activity of photography, the idea of autonomy and self-sufficiency, received ideas of beauty and taste and the language of repetition and reinterpretation. For the visual texts in this exhibition will nonetheless prevail as photographic images and these texts will always fulfil a didactic function regardless of the obscurity of the allegory.

Currently the *Virtue and Vice* exhibition is showing at Watershed in Bristol until 6 July before moving to Nottingham University Arts Centre and Portalen Køge Bugt Kulturhus in Denmark. Unfortunately, Helen Chadwick's *Wreaths to Pleasure 1 & 10* (1993) will not be travelling and has been returned to Southampton City Art Gallery.

Michelle McGuire

notes

- 1 Warner, M., *Monuments & Maidens*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1985, Foreword p xix
- 2 Brecht, B., Quote—Benjamin, W., *A short history of photography*, SCREEN, Spring 1972. First published in *The Literarische Welt*, 18th September 1931.
- 3 Dauthendey, K., Quote - Benjamin, W., *A short history of photography*, SCREEN, Spring 1972
- 4 Richon, O., *I Can't Explain it all Myself*— Conference. Held at the Showroom Cinema in Sheffield. 21st March 1997. Accompanying the conference is the *Virtue and Vice* catalogue containing the essays *Allegorical Impulses* by Rosemary Betterton (Jan. '97) and *The aim of allegory* by Mirelle Thijsen (Jan. '97).
- 5 Fletcher, A. *ALLEGORY The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, New York, 1967
- 6 Wiertz, A., Quote - Benjamin, W., *A short history of photography*, SCREEN, Spring 1972.
- 7 Warner, M., *Monuments & Maidens*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1985, p 331.
- 8 Owens, C., *The Allegorical Impulse*, October 12, 13, MIT Press 1980.
- 9 Eagleton, T., *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Verso, 1981, p 6