**Virtue and Vice**

**Derivations of Allegory in Contemporary Photography**

Site Gallery, Sheffield 11th March–10th May

‘Allegory means ‘other speech’ (alia oratio), from altis, other, and agorainin, to speak openly; it signifies an open declaratory speech which contains another layer of meaning.’

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 complicating 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,’ by ‘the fact that less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality.’

There, ‘something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, something set up’ in order for it to relate within contemporary society.

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 practice. 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 reveal an audience prepared to an audience trained to appreciate the task in a desire to know and understand. Mediaval 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 educated elite. Today, rounding an allegorical style has bred condemnation and denunciation throughout history precisely for its apparent exclusion and substitute meanings.

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: Blissor (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 and surreal imagery. The series of images appears to everyone. The ambiguity of the allegory revealing the true Virtue and Vice of the social norms and values of our times.

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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 contemporaneous cultural issues. However, the transition from painting to photography changes the perception of these images to that of 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, 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 nudes 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. Cohen, in particular, recontextualises the representation, rhetoric and aesthetic of an image. As an image, these objects become analogical signs and as a sign the object has 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 Incarnation (1995) includes materials such as Plexiglass tube, fluorescent light, display cabinets and transparent plastics. More than anything, the female images represented in the exhibition intends 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.’ Indicating that photography as a medium pertains to a visual world removed from itself. This is eloquently deployed 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 I & II (1993) and Modo 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. Modo Positivo, itself, is a work is 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 aesthetics of an image. The photographs 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 analagous 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...

ticy under the manipulative hand of the allegorist, awaiting such meaning as he or she may imbue it with.’

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 Kage Bugt Kulturhus in Denmark. Unfortunately, Helen Chadwick’s Wreaths to Pleasure I & II (1993) will not be travelling and has been returned to Southampton City Art Gallery.

notes
3 Dauthendey, K., Quo—Benjamin, W., A short history of photography. SCREEN, Spring 1972.