Eva Stenram

Eva Stenram's practice revolves around making manipulations to photographic images, so that they invert, undermine, or contradict their original or intended meanings. Stenram reworks the different genres with which we classify photographic images, and the different uses to which the medium is put, in order to create visual paradoxes. Rather than taking the recent history of art as her primary starting point, the artist most often draws upon vernacular or 'found' imagery – that is to say, she investigates what photography is at the service of, in the wider world. Accordingly her diverse subjects have included 'trick' photography, travel photography, family mementoes, pornography, and tourist postcards. In each of these cases she intentionally bends or breaks their rules: our expectations of how they function are frustrated or inverted. To put it another way, in each of her bodies of work to date, she has tested the nature of our investments in the medium.

One early body of work, for example, both celebrated and travestied the sentimental and biographical functions which family photographs serve. 'Schoolphoto 1979-94' is a truly perverse form of self-portrait: a class photograph where all 16 of the class members are the same individual at 16 different ages. Unified by being rendered in black and white, the work appears convincing whilst being an impossible and imaginary image. Documents of our family history and early lives, Stenram seems to imply, play a unifying function – in creating a coherent biography and regulating memory. Michel Foucault has similarly argued that the documents which govern our lives (including documentary photographs) help ensure that our discrete identities remain coherent and intact over time. 'Schoolphoto' performs this function in negative, breaching the unity of time and space to creates an artificial 'non-time' which exists only for the work of art.

One feature of the artist's practice has been a quiet subversion of power relationships, whether between family members, royalty and commoners, viewer and viewed at. The series 'Family Portraits' proposed an impossible image – a composite which appeared to be a group of family members all refigured as children, so that familial hierarchies were reversed. A recent body of work has continued Stenram's fascination with the paradoxical photograph. Simply entitled 'Absent', it is a reworking of the so-called 'Cottingley Fairies', the 'faked' photographs from 1917-20 which duped Sir Arthur Conan Doyle into believing in their existence. Stenram digitally removed the fairies, so that the images now simply show young girls at play. Stenram's digital illusion removes, rather than recreates the existing illusion. The project is a kind of triple-bluff, where the photographs' status as real or imaginary is impossible to determine. It is unclear how much of the photograph is 'real'; how much 'vintage' retouching from the 1910s; and how much is Stenram's own work. The results are experiments in visual 'reverse-engineering', as well as being meditations on the past and future of the medium.

The artist's current project, seen here, has the misleadingly simple collective title 'Landscape with Cameras'. We encounter images of wooded parkland, which in theory should be restful and restorative. Stenram's interventions have been to insert CCTV cameras which variously sprout from tree trunks and push through ferns. Trying to navigate these images can prove troublesome; Stenram offers no obvious explanation for the cameras' presence or her choice of arrangement. On the one hand, given CCTV cameras' omnipresence in our everyday lives, the compositions are almost plausible (England has the highest number of CCTV cameras per capita of any country in the world). At the same time, we might find them variously absurd, ridiculous or alarming. Whilst threatening, our attention is also drawn as the artist notes, to "the inherent impotence of the cameras – they have no clear purpose – or at least a different purpose to surveillance cameras' usual ones." Given the genesis of the artist's previous projects, it is clear that 'Landscape with Cameras' is a meditation upon why we take pleasure in looking and/or being looked at. It is also an inversion of the pictorial tradition in landscape photography, which excludes the very (technological) objects the (natural) scene is presented to us with. In emphasising the bucolic peace of pastoral life, our ability to gaze at such objects is forgotten. In 'Landscape with Cameras', Stenram rewires the roles of the natural and technological worlds, rather than the axes of time and space. Cameras, naturally, allow us to look as much as be looked at; and they present us with the delightful view on offer. Since such films as Dziga Vertov's 'Man with a Movie Camera', they have also been anthropomorphised or presented as a roving, omnipotent eye. The images' sense of foreboding or suspense creates a cinematic effect – and the lonely locations recall several famous points of references from 'The Blair Witch Project' to 'The Birds'. The cameras' apparent uselessness can also suggest that they are merely in waiting for visual 'prey' – which may be ourselves.

The artist's intentions, though, are intentionally left unclear; the lack of an obvious narrative direction to follow means that we are left to orient ourselves through these strange scenarios. Each scene frustrates our desire for narrative completion, instead offering a double-edged self-reflexiveness which the artist describes as "the construction of a closed, self-repeating loop." In Stenram's world, the land is a problem rather than a panacea. The very questions which the works bring unavoidably to mind – 'who is watching' or 'why are we being watched, even here?" – are left completely unanswered. We have no means of ascertaining how her artifice relates to the phenomenal world which the camera lens originally recorded. We are left trapped, imaginatively, between a rock and a hard place. 'Landscape with Cameras' refutes John Berger's argument that "every image" is always "also about the absence of the real thing". Rather, we are left with the conclusion that we can never tell what might be the pre-existing 'real' that the work of art is absent from.

Below: From '**Landscape with Cameras**', lambda print, 2005