

As it is seen

Melanie Stidolph

NU REVIEW/ MELANIE STIDOLPH: LAST SUMMER

Interviewed by Stefanie Braun, photography consultant and co-editor of NU Review

SB: First of all, thank you again Melanie for agreeing to showcase previously unseen images of 'Last Summer' in the first issue of NU Review, some of which are now also available on Photomonitor. NU's first issue looks at ideas around habitat through the eyes of artists, photographers and writers, how we as humans relate to our environment and to each other, and in the context of this it was fantastic to be able to include images of your project. I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about the title first. 'Last Summer' is a very understated yet evocative title and suggests, probably for most of us, positive thoughts as well as feelings of nostalgia. The images have actually been taken over several summers and the project is ongoing. What does the title suggest to you?

MS: Thank you for the invitation Stefanie to be part of NU, and to Christiane for offering us a platform at Photomonitor, it is great to be able to reflect on the work through these opportunities. This is the first time I've made a work that is intentionally a series of images. Giving it a title gave it a frame to stretch into. Previous work has often leant on the longing implied in looking at photographic images; you feel something of the live moment when it was captured, but at the same time, you know that moment is passed. 'Last Summer' is reflective of this and a sense of holding onto an ideal; projecting forward from a moment of loss and holding on to a possible future while the reality of it gets further away.

SB: The project started in New Zealand in 2017 where you had gone on holiday, but then you carried on taking images on beaches back in Cornwall, UK, where you live. How do you think these different locations, countries and time zones have informed and shaped your images? To me the images taken in New Zealand are definitely more dream like, nearly other worldly, whereas the images taken in the UK appear to have a greater physical distance to the groups photographed, a harsher light, more elements of rocks... This could all be due to the landscape being so different but maybe also how your own perception of looking at the beach and its inhabitants has changed?

MS: Before this project began I had been working in a completely different way for several years and had turned away from subjects that used to excite me, and from shooting on film. I was using automatic triggers to fire the shutter in response to movement and changes in sound and light, and came indoors where I had been outside. In New Zealand I was far away from home, so anything I saw I had to photograph or I'd never see it again in that location. It gave me a freedom and an impetus to photograph. The picture on the title page of the feature in NU became the beginning of the series. It was being in the rockpool with the group and seeing them from the other side that made it so special, sharing a love of water, being in the same pool of liquid and using the camera to feel closer to the subject. There are images taken in Cornwall, additional to those shown in NU, that were taken on a misty morning, and they have that same 'other worldly' quality I think that you are referring to, perhaps even more so; the groupings are separate from the landscape behind them and the focus is more intent on their relationship with the rocks and each other. Continuing the series opens the potential for me to react in a more nuanced way to the idea of family I had been holding on to. Through photographing I become open to the generosity of strangers in the moment of encounter, I become part of the scene, if not part of the photograph.

SB: In your text for NU you use this intriguing expression 'the theatre space of the beach and the riverside' to describe your preferred location as well as this lovely term of 'co-habitation'. The beach has been photographed countless times and generates expectations like no other - most of us document each detail of our trips to the seaside in our own amateur photographs. What I like very much about your images is that the groups you photograph seem on the one hand

very composed and directed, as if the rocks or the beach act like a theatre stage, the figures perfectly in harmony with their environment, folded into it nearly. Yet the images also appear very accidental, nonchalant observations of groups where the intimacy between the individuals is very much present, it is preserved and felt. What is your relationship to the groups photographed? Do you ask permission? Do you think this is an important factor?

MS: That's a beautiful phrase Stefanie - 'folded into it'. Sometimes I ask permission, if I need to be close to capture the scene and if people will become more easily identifiable because of that. I'm nervous about it, partly because I don't want people to say no (if I've worked up the courage to ask them, I really want the picture) and partly because as soon as you ask, the scene changes. I'm not sure if that's because in the slight shift of attention and posture that happens, we become more aware of the subject, or more aware of the photographer. When I'm close I ask, I don't want to take liberties, and people so far, have always said yes. I compose quickly, so the moment of taking isn't long, but I'm often around in the scene for a while, going swimming, or sitting in the sun, sharing the space and making it obvious I am taking pictures while making eye contact. That's part of what helps me feel my way into finding the photographs. There's a few I haven't taken because they felt too intrusive, and some I've taken but only shared with the subjects.

SB: Not being part of the group you depict seems an important element in your work. Yet, there is a warmth the images exude that could be seen as a desire for wanting to be part of the picture. In your text for NU you also explain that one of the motivations for taking these images of groups of people comes with the painful experience of not being able to have a family of your own. I think it is very brave to go out and talk about childlessness, an issue that is often pushed aside in our society, still a big taboo. How does it feel for you to openly address this issue through your work?

MS: I think brave is an interesting word in relation to this. It doesn't feel brave to share the photographs and the motivation for them but perhaps more in the taking of them. There is a heart-quickenning self-consciousness that is part of feeling separate from the scene and part of the activity of being there with a camera, which might not be welcome, for understandable reasons. When I was in the middle of trying to get pregnant, the grief and the feelings of embarrassment and shame in not to be able to have a child were strong. Coping with that was down to friends and amazing organisations like Gateway Women, who put my struggles in the context of a bigger social picture. This is part of why I started the project, to hopefully give a foothold or different angle for others who are in this experience.

SB: There is an extraterrestrial quality in the light of some of the images. It is as if we can mirror ourselves in the warmth of the scenes, but also experience a slight unease because it shows the elusiveness of our earthly existence. Is this something you intended?

MS: A scene and the light is so fleeting and unpredictable, that's why I love to go out a lot, to go walking, for an hour or all day, again and again. I am reconsidering my relationship to the subject as I walk or sit and observe. Every image that becomes part of the series expands on the starting point for the project and shifts me to a different place. Being interested in what's outside us is an enormous gift; shifting from a place of pain to one of curiosity has been an unexpected effect of the project.

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Not all days have nights
Not all blades have knives

by Paola Paleari

There are encounters whose precision belongs to a time with no beginning and no end. A time that stands still, an entity so immense and profound that it is out of our limited comprehension to grasp. Like tadpoles in a pond, we swim in its warm moisture without realizing that we are nourished and even made possible by it.

These encounters occur every day, methodically, periodically. They smell like ever-green miracles and shine like drops of infinity; they are everywhere around and inside us, yet we scarcely notice them. It requires a refined sensitivity to catch a glimpse of them, a willingness to look not with our eyes only; and even so, they are hard to define.

I look at Melanie Stidolph's images with wonderment, because it seems like she manages to photograph the unphotographable. I am not referring to the materiality of the physical phenomena she encapsulates with a click: the sudden tilt of a bird's head, the urgency of objects propelled into flying or falling under the dictatorship of the force of gravity. I am rather talking about a certain grace, as Simone Weil put it, which is almost as rare and volatile as the void itself.

"Grace fills empty spaces," Weil wrote, "but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void". I can't tell if it is my becoming a mother that has created the vacuum and opened the crack through which I can see what Melanie sees. I have in any case speculated that what didn't happen for her and recently happened to me have the same disruptive charge which is needed to make space for something else than one's self.

To take a step back - or maybe, more precisely, a step aside - is not the quality primarily praised in a photographer. The successful photographer's hand is quick, firm and conclusive; a martial attitude embedded in the same verbs bearing the photographic action (shoot, catch, frame, freeze). Melanie's hand, instead, is tentative, indulgent and recurrent. If there's a trace of fight in her images, it's an internal and solitary one - a hunt with no trophies to hang on the wall. The decisive moment is silenced by the comprehension of its absence.

A whole system is built, here, and is then allowed to live its life, with no expectations of what it might return. Enabling it with complete acceptance is the closest I can think to the ideal of creation. Melanie's work unfolds on many levels, and she makes no mystery that the deepest of them is incredibly private and painful. At the same time, it opens a door into an expanded selfless state leading towards the enjoyment of those murmuring encounters which would otherwise go unheard - and it's really up to us whether we want to join her or not. Once we assent, we are made part of a looping fight whose burden she had to carry and whose reward she chose to share.

Commissioned in response to 'Endless Reproduction'.

A BODY, IN PARTS, INTERJECTS

by Lizzie Lloyd

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen.

Gertrude Stein

Actions proliferate in Melanie Stidolph's work. Inside looking out: a bird alights; an apple falls; the bird is missing; a camera awaits. Inside looking in: a light flares; balls are thrown; a chair drops; an egg breaks; a shadow is cast; a balloon is punctured; a white orb glows, the same chair drops; another egg is thrown; light reflects. A light flashes; a shutter releases. Periodically a body, in parts, interjects: standing, reaching, holding, yielding. More bodies, outside this time: swimming, looking, sitting, paddling, drying, lying, clambering, searching. They laugh, chatter, call out. The camera waits. The camera waits. The camera waits.

This chronicling of Stidolph's work tells but part of the story. In my retelling I'm surely mixing things, my chronology awry: past moments bleed into present, future and imagined moments, their particularity dissolving though the action of repetition, reframing and looking again. My retelling here is another repetition of course, another way to make sense of the images, another attempt at reconfiguring them according to another kind of logic, in relation to another kind of life. All of which feels appropriate here. Take *Endless Reproduction* (2022), a photo book which features excerpts from older works, going as far back as 2011, and additions from hundreds of images not shared before. In her enfolding of earlier images into new works, you get the sense that she is looking back at previous images to reinhabit them, to see them afresh. That is after all a life, a series of experiences new and remembered that become subsumed by and reimagined in the life we are living in the present.

This tendency toward the reflective also plays out in *Last Summer* (2017–ongoing). As a series of shots of what I assume to be friends and families set at the seaside or on riverbank *Last Summer* rings out, at first sight, with rose-tinted nostalgia. Some of these images feature groups wholly absorbed in their pottering, others are taken at a distance their subjects unaware of being observed. Still others are more intimate, taken straight on, the protagonists sometimes making eye contact with the camera, welcoming the body behind the camera or the photograph into their worlds. You soon realise, though, that the bodies figured in these shots are rarely the same, that *Last Summer* is not a record of Stidolph's own holidays but a bearing witness to the holidays of strangers. And the hazy views, muted tones and the odd pop of light-hearted summer colour become tinged, not with wistful recollection but something more loaded.

Stidolph is open about her many years spent trying to get pregnant. She wants her work to be in dialogue with the matter of being childless by circumstance. *Last Summer* is a way of interrogating the idea of family, in all its guises, beyond the binary of having children or not having children. Stidolph's repeated exposure to and sharing in the watery landscapes of families at leisure becomes an act of anthropological curiosity – she watches groups interact, registering how they behave individually and together, and also when she is close, how they respond to her and her camera. It is an act of careful circling, waiting, watching, returning, reflecting and re-framing.

As open as she is about her personal circumstances, at times, Stidolph pointedly subtracts herself from the work. Even the act of pressing the shutter feels too personal, too deliberate, too charged, too active. From around 2011 she began using automatic shutter release systems – the kind usually used by wildlife photographers to capture action shots of animals – so that control of the shutter is generated by external stimuli such as changes in sound, light, or movement. This further mechanising of the act of taking a photograph, an act already highly mediated by technology, has a variety of consequences. In *Trigger* (2011) a camera is set up on a ledge used to feed birds just outside the window of a caravan. Its lens, however, is turned

not to the outside world as you might expect but to the window looking in. The shutter of the external camera is triggered by the alighting of birds on the ledge beside it but not, again as the technology is intended, to capture close-ups of the birds themselves. Instead Stidolph's external camera takes a photo of a bedroom sometimes empty, sometimes featuring a figure holding another camera, and an unmade bed, all of which is partly obscured by bright light and nearby trees reflecting on the window. It's a circuitous set up, suggesting an infinite feedback loop. And equivocal too. The scene is carefully staged but also nods towards objectivity and the documentary, the authentic and the fictional, leaving you unsure of the true subject of the image. Estate (2013) functions similarly, this time using a trigger in combination with flash. While an ostentatious bunch of flowers on a domestic table are filmed, an off-screen camera is hooked up to a trigger measuring the sound levels of the street outside. As the voices in the street increase the camera unleashes rapid shutter bursts alongside the firing of the camera's flash creating intense fluctuations between strobe-like illumination and a pitch-black screen. The subject of the work is made slippery since that which is visible – the flowers – are only made visible by the environmental action on the street setting off the flash. The visible, then, becomes mere distraction, the work's real action taking place off screen.

Such an exploration of visibility and concealment features strongly in Stidolph's work. Like her deliberate misuse of triggers, her manipulation of light and shadow is used to divert attention, often even sabotaging the integrity of the image. Much of our understanding of light and shadow originates from Plato who saw light as synonymous with knowledge, shadow with ignorance, thereby creating an enduring hierarchy between the two. Plato's famous myth tells of a group of prisoners shackled to a cave wall who are unable to look directly at the light behind them. They assume that the shadows thrown against the wall of the cave are 'in all respects real' rather than mere silhouettes. The myth conceives of light as illuminating and clarifying, shadow as intrinsically lacking and constituting an absence of substance and knowledge. But Stidolph upends this. In Estate, for example, the violence of the flash estranges

rather than clarifies, rendering the flowers monstrous not pretty, and drawing attention to a peripheral form rather than the main event (the voices in the street). In The Fall (2012) balls are repeatedly thrown or dropped against various backdrops – open kitchen cupboards, staircases, doorways, unmade beds – and captured using flash. In these works, the light of the flash frequently functions to obscure rather than reveal: it reflects off the shiny surface of the balls creating what look like holes in the image or flattens the rumpled bedsheets which only gain solidity through the articulation of cast shadows. This partial inversion of light and shadow is used, then, to disorientate and destabilise understanding.

Repetitions, like the actions with which I began, proliferate in Stidolph's work: cameras shoot cameras, glass reflects, light throws shadow, images return. They enact a deliberate picking apart of the mechanics of photography and the nature of Stidolph's role in the process of image-making. She stages, she documents, she tampers, she observes, her body enters, then deflects. Her deliberate misuse of the tools and techniques of her trade enable this: triggers divert and flashes conceal. This misuse recalls another lover of repetitions, Gertrude Stein, who appears in the epigraph to this text. Her love of repetition was embodied in the circularity of her sentences that paid little heed to the conventions of grammar or syntax. 'The only thing that is different from one time to another,' Stein wrote, 'is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything'. Repetition is a retrying, a remaking, a seeing anew.

Commissioned as part of Synesthesia, funded by Cultivator Cornwall.

MELANIE STIDOLPH www.melaniestidolph.com

Melanie Stidolph works with video, film, and photography. She studied at The University of Leeds & The University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Her recent work is influenced by experiences of infertility & childlessness and she is drawn to rock pools & mis-using photographic equipment. Stidolph says:

The slow observational process of creating the work is a form of healing; as I took the first shot of what has become a series, I realised it was the first time in a long time I could look long enough to compose a photograph, rather than look away from a family scene I could not recreate in my own life.

Commissions include The Photographers' Gallery & Tate Modern. Solo exhibitions include Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art & Kamloops Art Gallery, Canada. Group shows in London, Madrid, Vancouver and New York. Curated 'Except The Mirror' for Format Festival, Derby. Currently exhibiting in Exeter Contemporary Open 2022. She is Curator, Public Programme at Tate St Ives.

STEFANIE BRAUN www.nureview.org

Stefanie Braun is a curator who lives and works in London. In 1996, her studies in Visual Theories lead her to London from her native Germany where she has stayed ever since. For over a decade (2000 – 2013) she was a curator at The Photographers' Gallery, London, organising exhibitions of historical and contemporary photography and editing many catalogues and publications along the way. Stefanie also has a great interest in vintage fashion and textiles and was running her showroom 'Fraubraun' for several years which brought together her love for photography with fashion. She is now a consultant supporting artists and photographers with the development and editing of significant bodies of work.

PAOLA PALEARI www.paolapaleari.net

Paola Paleari is an Italian independent writer, editor and curator based in Copenhagen. She is currently co-curator of the Contemporary Art Program at Vestjyllands Kunstpavillon and since 2018 she has directed the exhibition platform JIR SANDEL. She writes extensively about contemporary art and between 2013 and 2018 she covered the position of deputy editor at YET magazine. Her main area of interest is the photographic language and its relations with the contemporary visual culture and art practices. She is also interested in the intersection between critical and creative writing and often intertwines art criticism with other forms of storytelling.

LIZZIE LLOYD www.lizzielloyd.co.uk

Lizzie Lloyd is a Bristol-based art writer and researcher. She is a regular contributor to Art Monthly and has contributed to publications including Art Review, Journal of Contemporary Painting, Frieze, artnet and This is Tomorrow. Her writing has been commissioned by numerous galleries including Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, Workplace Gallery, Field Art Projects, New Art Projects, Foreground, Hestercombe, Cubitt Residency Programme and Exeter Phoenix. Her work has been exhibited/performed at Plymouth Art Weekender, No Format Gallery, Safehouse 1, and Phoenix Space Brighton. She has been writer-in-residence at Arnolfini, Art Writers Group: Plymouth, and at the CCA Brighton, in collaboration with Katy Beinart. Lloyd is a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art and Art & Writing at University of the West of England, Bristol.

As it is seen is part of a new programme of exhibitions at Grays Wharf supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

As it is seen is co-curated by Melanie Stidolph and Megan Beck.

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