

WAITING FOR

ARTIST

John Calcutt discovers a tangible presence in the abstract emptiness of Oliver Godow's photographs

I never have seen, nor probably ever will, a job description for an artist or a philosopher. What is it that they are supposed to do, exactly? I think it would be difficult to define with any precision. Jean-François Lyotard has had a shot at it, suggesting that both artist and philosopher produce work in situations where the rules governing the making of such work are unknown. OK. My own provisional specifications would probably be slightly more modest, rather less heroic. I would be looking for them to perhaps make the familiar seem less familiar, to make me look and think again. Here's an example of the kind of thing I am thinking of. Jean-Paul Sartre goes to a café to meet his friend, Pierre. Sartre enters the café and sees that Pierre is not there. Again: He sees that he is not there. He sees the absence of Pierre. The absence of Pierre has somehow turned into a presence, something that can be seen. The difference between visibility and invisibility is no longer quite so straightforward. This idea, derived from an apparently mundane, everyday experience, gives me a thrill, and I experience a similar kind of sensation when I look at Oliver Godow's photographs. I see what is there in these images (after my own fashion), but I also seem to see what is not there – as if it were there. It is as if I actually see absence, and witness waiting.

On the one hand, this is doubtless because Godow often photographs the empty interiors of cafes and restaurants, and serves to remind me of Sartre's experience. But I also think there is more to it than this quirky coincidence that just so happens to strike me. Taken as a whole, Godow's work seems to thematise questions of the visible and the invisible, of absence and presence. The photographs invite us to reflect upon the relations between our sensory perception of the concrete, material world of appearances (everyday reality, for want of a better term) and our intellectual intuition of those organising schemes and patterns that seem to lie 'behind' and to underpin this reality (an invisible realm of abstract ideas, concepts, beliefs: God, capitalism, quantum mechanics, Gaia, US foreign policy, ideology, human consciousness, gravity, etc.).

A lot of people get nervy around abstract speculation, and especially around abstract art. Perhaps, in seeming to represent nothing – in being non-representational – so-called abstract art represents too much. Perhaps it carries the threat of excessive meaning, meaning expanded beyond the limits of everyday language and experience; meaning unavailable to ordinary common sense. Perhaps it cuts against the commonly held view that immediate reality precedes everything else, and that this reality is itself concrete, unambiguous and eminently 'readable'. To 'abstract' it in any way is to betray its manifest simplicity, to needlessly complicate and confuse its ready intelligibility. It is to displace a primary truth with a secondary fiction.

Steady. Godow is, after all, a photographer, and what is a photograph if not the documentary proof par excellence of the uncomplicated truth of the world as appearance? Admittedly, this belief has taken a knock in recent years due to the potential for manipulation of the image offered by digital photography and Photoshop, but Godow's images suggest no such tricky business, beyond, perhaps, such conventional photographer's processing techniques as the slight intensification of colour here and there.

Opposite: 'Soho II' – a space with a mirror and some yellow. London 2007. piezopigmentprint

GODOW

ALL COURTESY THE ARTIST





ARTIST

But let's take a moment to review some of the recurrent motifs in Godow's work (for it is within the context of this general body of work that individual pieces gain their particular purchase). Here we will find images of various kinds of architectural interiors, all of which are unpopulated, but all of which contain signs and traces of human activity. Often these interiors are sites of sociability, such as cafes and restaurants: often they appear to be 'behind the scenes' at some unspecified institution, such as a museum or gallery, for example. Many of the photographs, however, have been taken in the street, and focus upon apparently slight visual incidents: the reflection upon a car's glossy body; a shop sign; the colour and shape of a piece of fabric, or distressed wall surface (such work would include: 'Rhombus Blue', Stuttgart, 2006; 'Volv-o Love I', Dusseldorf, 2007; 'Newcastle Blue', Newcastle, 2007; 'ALEX', Berlin, 2006).

To varying degrees, the works in this latter group seek to find that point at which the recognisable images of things located within the 'real' world



fragile clarity pictured elsewhere.) Perhaps these images could also lead us to consider the philosophical possibility that the abstract may be as much a precondition of the real, as the real is a precipitate of the abstract (and that order and disorder may also stand in a similar relation to each other). To put it bluntly: maybe these supposedly polar opposites are finally not so distant from each other. Pierre may not be in the café, but his absence is still a form of presence.

In this same group of works we also observe the point at which three dimensional form gives way to two dimensional surface. In many of his other photographs, Godow does not shy away from this issue of surface. Frequently, in fact, it even seems to be yet another theme to be developed and explored. Not only are surfaces the ostensible subject in works such as, 'Abstract Orange', Berlin, 2007, and 'Jaegers II, London', 2005/07, but in other pieces (such as 'Mirror with Yellow, London', 2007, and 'Mealdeal box with extras, Dusseldorf', 2007) Godow has captured the image of a frame – a picture frame, a window frame – within the actual frame of his photograph, thus echoing the fact of the photograph's flat rectangularity within the codified register of representation (the photograph is one kind of flat,



transform into decontextualised patterns, in other words, abstractions. They no longer solely represent something else (such as a car, or a wall), they are also present in their own right (as a field of colours and shapes). Thus we witness a kind of détente between the real and the abstract: both make active claims upon our attention. In this sense they seem to deny the conceptual separation between photograph as documentary fact and photograph as creative invention. They may even encourage us to doubt the claim that realism constitutes a primary truth and that abstraction constitutes a secondary fiction. The 'abstract' is as much an element of social reality as the empirical. (Another significant group of Godow's works features images of rubbish, debris and general messiness, hinting at an ever-present disorder that co-exists with and always threatens to disrupt the

circumscribed surface that represents other kinds of flat, circumscribed surfaces).

Admittedly, this may not strike us as very extraordinary at first. A photograph is an object with a flat surface: big deal. There could, however, be something more interesting going on here. Not all surfaces have the same value. Victor Burgin has argued that the surface of the photograph has long been a source of distrust, especially insofar as photography's claims to artistic status are concerned. As far as our understanding of works of art is concerned, he claimed, two powerful cultural forces combine to inform the process. The European tradition of humanism leads us to believe that each of us 'is an autonomous being, possessed of self-knowledge and an irreducible core of "humanity", a "human essence" in which we all partake...'. Artistic

Above left: 'Vitrines, Kunsthalle Kiel 2005', piezopigmentprint
Above far left: 'Mealdeal with extras, Dusseldorf 2007', piezopigmentprint

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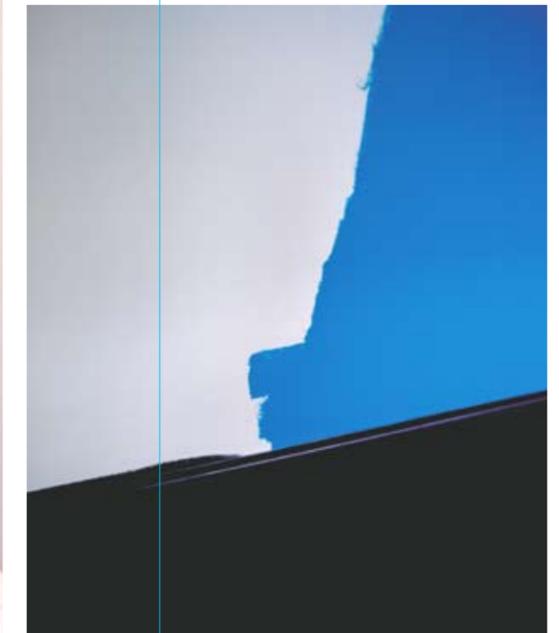


Above right: 'Newcastle blue I, Newcastle 2007', piezopigmentprint
Above: 'Abstract red/white I, Berlin 2007', piezopigmentprint

production thus involves the 'expression' of that 'human essence' into the world through various material processes (traditionally, for example: leaving deposits of pigment, chalk or graphite; carving stone; modelling clay). But, Burgin continues, our response to the work of art is also dependent upon what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida termed 'logocentrism'. Logocentrism, he says, refers to the commonly held belief that meaning and truth have an origin that lies hidden 'behind' surface appearance: truth is not superficial and arbitrary; on the contrary, it is deep and has a source. Thus, in responding to the work of art, we scrutinise its surface for those expressive traces left by its maker. In the brushstrokes or chisel marks we find signs of the artist's expressive labour, evidence that leads us back to the artist's struggle to externalise their

'human essence'. As viewers, we recognise and empathise with these material signs of the artist's 'human essence' because it is an 'essence' in which we share. As Burgin points out, however, the surface of the photograph is resistant to such scrutiny: it will not respond appropriately to such an examination. 'The surface of the photograph offers no reassurance of the founding presence of a human subject. It is either glossy, "slick", or it is matt, "implacable" – both appearances are grounds for suspicion.'

In foregrounding surface, and in suggesting that the invisible (the 'abstract') shares ground with the visible (the world of everyday appearances, the 'real'), Godow appears to agree with Oscar Wilde's provocative claim that, 'It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible'. But perhaps Godow is less certain and final than Wilde. Burgin reminds us in his essay that, "The belief that meaning can ever be present... "behind" a unit of language, or any other representational form [such as a photograph], is an illusion of language. In



whatever form, meaning is only ever produced within a complex play of differential relations in which final closure of meaning upon a point of original certainty is endlessly deferred.'

In other words, we are always waiting for the final meaning, for certainty, to arrive. Endlessly waiting. Time and again in Godow's photographs we see empty chairs (waiting for their occupants?), empty cups (waiting to be filled?), empty rooms (rooms full of emptiness?). In the Café Flores, Sartre waits for Pierre, even though Pierre is already somehow there through his very absence. He gazes abstractly about the room as the waiter approaches to take his order.

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Oliver Godow is an MFA graduate of Glasgow School of Art. He is showing new work from his residency at Durham Cathedral 2006/07 at Reg Vardy Gallery, Newcastle 6 November – 21 December