

Calibrations of a Reality

On first appearances, Mervyn Arthur's photographs seem resistant to the idea of being photographs at all. They show objects set within an interior world of variously coloured backdrops. The objects in the photographs are indiscernable in 'real' size and function; in many ways, they are better described, simply, as *shapes*. There is nothing much that appears to be happening, or has happened, or is about to happen; at least not within the temporal scales that we come to expect from photography. This is certainly not the kind of photography caught in the ecstasy of fleeting encounters.

Yet, these are photographs nonetheless. There is no escaping the scrubby marks to the table surfaces, the textures of paint, and other 'sparks of contingency' that rupture the formalism of each arrangement. These details are all satisfyingly photographic. Even the relationships of foreground and background elements (which are compositionally collapsed and deliberately confused in many of Mervyn Arthur's works) carry the distinctive focus qualities of the camera lens.

The *Slipshod* series involves the production of basic three-dimensional objects using folded paper card, and then staging them to be photographed. In some works the material architecture of these arrangements has been exposed. In *Slipshod (02)*, for instance, we see an irregular white object set against the unmistakable green surface of a cutting mat. Like others in the series, this object has been restlessly shaped, as though inspired (and just as much *frustrated*) by the creative options of Photoshop's Tool Palette. Some resemble sections of packaging material, which is something that Mervyn Arthur has explored in his previous series *Objects about something else*, 2013, but on close inspection they lack the accuracy of the manufacturing process. There are too many slight burrs and minor glitches that evidence the shoddy labours of the hand.

The objects, centrally placed within the frame, shirk any clear referentiality or identification as 'subject matter'. Their design and composition seems to follow a strategy of refusing the indexical pull of our gaze, while also refusing a complete submission to abstraction at the same time. They are works that operate a double refusal, as though motivated, first and foremost, by seeking to undermine our habits of photographic signification entirely. In this sense, there's a circuitry to Mervyn Arthur's work that is perhaps more to do with the legacies of Conceptual Art than it has to do with the histories of photography. Robert Morris's seminal *Box With The Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) had a similarly conceptual impasse, for example. As its title gives away, Morris's 'self-mediating' work simply presented a wooden box, inside of which (hidden from view) an audio recording plays the sounds of the very same box being made. Morris's work sandwiches the evidence of construction along with the construction itself, with these two aspects claiming the *illusion* of supporting (and withholding) each other's material realities.

We can also take reference further back through art history, to Still Life painting, and to Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin in particular. The precise placement of seemingly casual objects against a plain backdrop is just one aspect of the genre that Mervyn Arthur brings forward into his own work. Chardin's paintings of food, wine, and bourgeois bounty, were cherished by his contemporaries Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, for their 'beautiful buttery brushstrokes, the curves of his fat brush in the full impasto... the brightness of his whites, gleaming from the sun'. Chardin's paintings were never too lavish or magnificent, but just about plain enough to whet 18th century appetites. The Goncourts' remark of 'buttery brushstrokes' recognises the way that Chardin approached his paintings with methods that were extensive to the flavours on the table in front of him, the images of food taking on an extra realism through the 'condiment' textures of their representation.

The colours of Mervyn Arthur's photographs play upon the calibrations of a reality that is within the frame, and another reality that is referred outside of it. The white of paper or the brown of MDF wood in one or two of the *Slipshod* series are the only means of colour conditioning our gaze to worlds beyond the interiorenity of these arrangements. Everything else – the colours of pink, green, blue, and other toxic varieties – operates within the autonomous photographic realm that has been prepared before us; one that is defined and re-defined on its own terms. This interest in colour calibration extends to Arthur's *Screen Test* series, which present colour-card objects that are similar to those used by studio photographers to ensure colour correctness and standardisation through all stages of image production. The colour-card objects in the series appear as self-supporting structures that defy the photographic imperatives of flat and depthless colour. They are arranged at angles, offering their register of realness in multiple directions, and not exclusively for the camera it seems.

Should we opt for a photographic realism that is slavishly beholden to the indexes and narratives of the external world? Or should we seek our realism at the threshold of the camera's formal and technological limits? Instead, Mervyn Arthur keeps these two discredited positions alive within the same frame, making a claim for a realism that exists in the deference of both and in the refusal of either. The old saying that two wrongs don't make a right. Well, that is just wrong.

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