

Mervyn Arthur's *Camera Interiors*

Each image in the series *Camera Interiors* depicts the inside of a large format camera. More specifically, one sees the space that separates lens and film, which normally remains—from the viewpoint of its function—a dark chamber. These are spaces designed to facilitate making something visible and, insofar as they do this, they must remain invisible. Photographing these interiors displaces their function. It opens the innards of the 'black box' to its own procedures and reasons, means and ends. The resulting images gesture at themselves. They point both directly *and* obliquely at what they are and how they came to be. They are "direct" because you see precisely what the title promises and "oblique" because the way they show you this amounts to a kind of occlusion.

In light of this, one might recall that, historically, discussions of photography have made much of the peculiarity of the photograph's surface, which tends to be effaced in the apparently direct visual encounter a photograph offers with the thing it depicts. Normally one ignores, so the story goes, the material characteristics of tone, colour and texture as one looks through the surface to grasp what's beyond it. This has come to be thought of as photography's ostensive character, likening its mode of seeing to the significance of a pointing finger or to a demonstrative utterance that indicates nothing more than "this" or "that". The fact that photographs point those who look at them towards other things is an obvious and common aspect of photography that, nonetheless, has something peculiar about it. Arthur's *Camera Interiors* stage this peculiarity in a nuanced, pleasurable but ultimately provocative manner.

It is striking how much variation there is between the different interiors and how their treatment compounds the tension between photography's informational and aesthetic aspects.

Some have metallic surfaces bearing numbers, letters and scratches; marks and signs of their production, use and repair that beg a readerly mode of attention. The smooth white walls of others, patterned with structural ridges and enigmatic bulges and punctuated by the red dots of aperture covers comprise eerily aesthetic forms, compounded in the surface of their own description. Other chambers provoke more explicitly metaphoric associations, such as “backstage at the theatre” or “in an empty cell”. The relation between individual images and the series seems to elicit other, more general figures such as those associated with the camera obscura, pre-dating its photographic cousin by some centuries as a much used metaphor for reason’s power of survey and control over the visual world. Perhaps, the serial accumulation of these more modern chambers, linked as they are with such architectural, psychical, historical and pictorial antecedents might also encourage association with the ancient orator’s mnemonic strategy of archiving facts in the rooms of an imaginary palace so that their retrieval might be achieved at will by mentally retracing one’s steps through its interconnected rooms. But where does this associative journey leave one’s idea of memory if, as in the present case, both the “rooms” and the “facts” you put into them are indistinguishable?

For all these variations and the multiple associations they evoke, the structural elements revealed in these images—walls, plates and hinges, ridges, holes and the materials that cover them—are set within a space of roughly the same depth, seen from slightly differing viewpoints and having, crucially, exactly the same function. Given the logic of the series, it was obviously necessary for another camera to have been used to make visual access to this space possible. One after the other, we see this and then that serial connection emerging between particular chambers as each is displaced into view, so to speak, by the invisible space necessary to another camera’s functioning. Through the laborious processes of their construction—they are by no means as

simple to produce as their form and clarity of conception might suggest—these images point towards central concepts shaping the photographic apparatus but, in doing so, trap one's gaze in the shallow space of its core productions. Photographic ostension is turned upon itself, rendered implicit at the moment of becoming explicit. We see what's pointed out and can enjoy looking at it, thinking about the information it presents and sliding off into reverie on this basis. Yet, these pleasures and those thoughts are possibilities framed by an uncompromising displacement. All the other things, people and places, all of the ideas, desires and revelations that this space of photographic possibility might otherwise present are literally excluded by the solidity of the walls that give us our visual and conceptual sense of their proximity.

Andrew Fisher

*Dr. Andrew Fisher is an Artist and Writer and lectures in the Visual Cultures Department at Goldsmiths College. This essay was published in EASTinternational 2009 catalogue and then in an amended form in Philosophy of Photography 2012.*