

Breeding Dust: Cynthia Greig's Galleryscapes

By Michael Petry

Cynthia Greig's new photographs of the interior spaces of contemporary art galleries are at once physical landscapes as well as metaphorical ones. The dreams of artists shattered into dust lay on the floors of many gallery spaces, whether bad reviews, poor sales or broken relationships be the root cause, or simply the end of an artist's commitment to their craft. The mythic objectivity of the white walled gallery has also long been blown to dust, the myth shattered for the benefit of all, but as with all myths they long hold onto their alluring simplicity.

The gallery was deemed to be a space of pure artistic achievement, if an object was on the white walls of a museum it had to be there because it was of worth, value, discernment and it had found its way there through objective analysis. Of course we know that it was never true, prejudice, corruption, and bias have always played their part as has commerce. But no need to dwell on the unfairness of the hand in glove policy of galleries, museums, collectors and critics, we know these things happened, and to a certain extent still happen. But in the past the veil of fiction held, now we know that the old man behind the curtain is Oz, we simply don't care. Collectors often bypass the museum system by turning their taste (or that of their advisors) into a private museum and then open it to the public.

What do we really see when we walk through the door of the gallery or museum? Do we see the machinations of the art world, the business of the art world and how it all comes together in the placement of an object on a white wall? Things do not just get hung. The mechanisms at play are almost invisible, even after they have been pointed out, and certainly those

unaccustomed or unacquainted with the critique of the system will likely only see the fiction.

Greig in her photographic critique presents only a small fraction of the whole white wall of the gallery. She shows us again and again the point at which the wall, always a white wall, meets the floor, more often than not, a polished concrete floor (*Hasted Kraeutler*) and it is there, that she creates a memorable landscape. It is tempting to see the cracks in the floor (*Metro Pictures*) and apply them to the larger art world, dust getting in, messing up all that cleanliness. But the grit in an oyster just might turn into a pearl, and perhaps we have an opening here into another way of seeing, if not making, or presenting art.

The gallery imperfections are shown up in their full glory. Greig has magnified them like Marcel Duchamp did in partnership with Man Ray in *Dust Breeding* (1920). The Duchamp Ray collaboration saw Ray photograph Duchamp's *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even) which is better known as *Le grand verre* (The Large Glass), after it had gathered dust for over a year. Duchamp returned to his studio to find a new readymade and after the photo session wiped most of it clean. A small section of the dust was incorporated into the long changing work (it was made during the period of 1915-1923). Quentin Crisp said that "*after the third year, the dust doesn't get any worse*" which is why he never cleaned his New York apartment, unlike the galleries which aim to keep dust at bay.

Greig has framed her landscapes to recall the seascapes of Hiroshi Sugimoto, those stark black and white images of the voyage of time. She

has slightly lowered her gaze so that the horizon line is not directly in the middle of the picture plane (as in the Sugimoto's), which places our mental focus on the wall and the missing artworks. Like Sugimoto's images her new works are also almost all black and white though they are full colour photographs. They of course recall her own previous body of work where again what we are seeing in her photographs is not at first obvious. Her *Nature Morte* series presents typical still life scenarios but they are upended in that she at first painted all the objects (fruit, candles skulls) with white paint and then drew black outlines around their edges. The resulting photographs look like drawings until closely inspected. In the new landscapes we are again required to look closely, and we will also see time passing.

Household dust is said to be mainly the shed skin cells of the inhabitants, it is us. Paul Hazelton collects the dust found in people's homes to make his sculptures including *Death Duster* (2011/12) which is in the shape of a skull. He molded a synthetic wool duster before covering it in gathered dust, the result, is a fragile reminder of the temporality of our experience. Greig too has tried to capture those fleeting moments in a separate series of images. She presents the viewer with small mounds of gallery dust, most likely the remnants of the installation of screws into walls in order to hang work (*Gallery/Space/Dust*, from Leslie Sacks Contemporary, 10-18-13). Other bits of dust on gallery floors are visible in images that allow the viewer to recognize that people might have also once been in these empty spaces (*Detroit-Susanne Hilberry*) It calls to mind the possibility of being and nothingness at the same time, and perhaps for an artist, not showing work is a sort of nothingness, of not being. Making art is often spoken of as a calling, one *is* an artist, it is not something to do, it is an essentialness and

one that transcends the passing of the flesh into the grave. While the body of the artist might pass to dust, it surely must be their hope that their art does not.

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer has the vicar say '*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*' when performing a burial, then mourners toss a handful of dirt onto the coffin, then there is only the emptiness of death. Greig's images seem to have captured a sort of death. They are rather mournful, sad even, they speak of the death of art even while in the temples that celebrate it. Commerce has done so much to mediate the experience – all very black and white, so very clean, so bottom line. With each new record breaking auction, art and commerce combine in a deadly dance. Can a Warhol painting of death (*Silver Car Crash - Double Disaster*) costing \$105 million, or a Koon's sculpture of hot air in a balloon (*Balloon Dog - Orange*) at \$58 million be worth such huge sums? While quite a lot of their work is remarkable, what we now remark on is the remarkable prices a few billionaires are willing to pay for it. The content has been emptied out, nothing save the price matters. But then perhaps nothing really changes, over a hundred years ago Oscar Wilde quipped in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* that '*Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing*'.

Dorian's portrait aged and rotted away in his attic while the man remained untouched, like a blank white gallery wall. The portrait was hidden from view, as are the works that were in the gallery while Greig lay on the floor, searching out the missing architecture of making. Wilde added in the story that '*the mind of the thoroughly well-informed man is a dreadful thing. It is like a bric-a-brac shop, all monsters and dust...*

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MICHAEL PETRY

Michael Petry is an artist, author, and curator. He is director of MOCA London, and co-founder of the Museum of Installation, London. Born in El Paso, Texas, he has lived in London since 1981. Petry was the first Artist in Residence at Sir John Soane's Museum (2010/2011), was Guest Curator at the KunstAkademi, Oslo, Research Fellow at the University of Wolverhampton and and Curator of the Royal Academy Schools Gallery. His most recent book, *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Re-invigorate the Still-Life Tradition* was published by Thames & Hudson (2013) in English, German and Dutch and an exhibition based on the book will tour Norway, Sweden, Belgium and the UK starting in 2015. Petry is represented by the Sundaram Tagor Gallery, New York, Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston, Westbrook Gallery, London, Melissa Morgan Fine Art, Palm Desert and Zane Bennett Contemporary Art, Santa Fe.