



TOURIST

nicola loder

When I press my eyes while they are closed I can see a swarming field of colour. For as long as I can remember doing this, the field has eventually resolved into a monochromatic aerial view of a supermarket, not unlike the kind of flat view which Andreas Gursky might render. Why a supermarket; why from above? I've never had the privilege of this viewpoint before (the supermarket manager's point of view) so I am still wondering (perhaps it's a kids' land-o'-plenty). But it's an odd image to recall now for a few reasons. The image emerges out of an initial darkness, out of the experience of not being able to see anything. But I also try and resolve it in relation to something I have not actually seen (but clearly I can imagine it based on visual experiences merging with my fondness for the work of Gursky or a residual childhood fantasy). It seems that I cannot see nothing, or not see anything. I am compelled to visualise and even the most abstract visual sensations are horded by my mind toward one mental image or another, for whatever reason.

I'd love to know to what extent these abstract visual sensations are experienced by the so-called 'blind'. It's a layman's dumb question since optics is complex and blindness such a varied state; ranging from poor acuity to partial sight to blurred vision and so on. Actually, 'visual impairment' takes much better account of this complexity than 'blindness'. And there's also increasing speculation as to other aspects of vision apart from the ability to see detail, such as emotional colour intensities, and myriad other psychological links to seeing. Apparently 50% of sense information to the brain is visual but only 90% of what is seen contributes to the complex mental images that we formulate. However, I also remember reading case studies of people recovering their sight and being disappointed; the paradigm case of 'SB' for example, who after 60 years of being blind regained his sight and slid into a profound, worsening depression until he died 3 years later. Perhaps he overrated the sense, or perhaps it just compared poorly to his other more developed senses. I'm shocked by this story since it suggests the sense that I prize most (seeing) may actually be lacklustre compared to others.

What is the threshold between the terms and conditions of vision, between looking and imagining, and between imagining on the basis of past visual experience and imagining without any visual experience at all? How do others – including animals – see, especially

those who have different kinds and degrees of vision? An infant, for example, may only see in abstract and overall (rather than identifying specific details). Indeed, the development of vision occurs fully only over many years, and much of it is learned, based on accumulated experiences, such that blindness at an early age may leave a person with a very different sense of sight

The definition of blindness according to diminished acuity is typical of the technological obsession with closer detail and greater clarity, which has characterised optics. By this measure, the clearer and further we see, the better we see. Photography's invention in 1835 may simply have manifested a model of Renaissance optics that held sway for hundreds of years, and which has dominated the perception of ourselves and others since. The same model is continued through digital means which have led to the exponential proliferation of images of all kinds, which today arguably comprise a substitute reality. Indeed, as many have observed, the image is a social relation, and we are held in place as images in relation to others via the laws of optics as much as anything.

But images really only a document of the surface of reality, and do not capture its deeper, hidden or occluded (ie. non-visual) dimensions. Which makes the question of whether others have the same image of themselves, the world around them – or even ourselves – a radical contention, since if this self-image varies or is contingent, all our identities may be profoundly challenged. The prospect threatens to return us to a fragmented, chaotic, world in parts, characterised by infant anxiety and helplessness, described in the 'mirror phase'.

Suffice to say, from photography to psychoanalysis, our self-definition is typically based on the increasing realism or graphism of representations, that is, greater and closer detail in this virtual reality. But alternately, what radical perception of the world and ourselves is possible regardless of images? Isn't this the shocking allure of being blind: that we might see so differently?

Alternative Optometrists who practice 'integrated visual therapies', seek to revise stigmata, impairment, and incapacity as alternative abilities which could provide new and potentially

deeper experiences of the world, though not based on the model of normalcy which is 20/20 vision. Accordingly, blurred or partial vision requires greater skills (and more senses) in interpreting visual data. For example, emotional states may become more pronounced in the absence of distracting detail, or there may be different dispositions in the left and right eyes (corresponding to left and right brain functions).

Perhaps increasingly we could cite deviations from the normalcy of optics, since any norm implies its deviation *contra posito*, as positive affirmations of alternative capabilities. Certainly we can observe a minor trend in art photography over 20 years characterised by a fascination with the incorrect or aberrant qualities of a fine print tradition. This trend, seemingly opposed to technological developments such as faster film speeds, greater contrast, finer grain, has instead valorised blurred images, incorrect exposures, camera shake and shudder as aesthetic virtues, since these may reveal further dimensions to the subject than merely correct technical procedure.

But a portrait of a blind child throws the whole point and apparatus of photography in train to an image-saturated society into stark relief. The point is double-edged since it's both fascinating to speculate on how others see differently to ourselves, and using the predominant means of visualisation to do this allows a directly comparable view to emerge. But it's also ultimately critical of the means which are evidently useless in capturing these radically alternative views of the world, and as sighted people looking at these portraits we soon realise that photography is practiced, and the world is constructed, to the exclusion not only of blind people, but to the 4 classical senses apart from vision.

Loder makes these pictures using some of the image-capture and manipulation functions that are included in standard software. Curiously some forms of blindness even conform to the various changes that filters can effect, such as pixellation or blurring, lightening or darkening. She chooses to render against the usual purpose of such software (which is to increase the likeness, to make things more convincing). So the Photoshop toolbar, like the camera, approximates a complete model of optics, not only its perfection in terms of verisimilitude and acuity, but its degradation, failing, and dysfunction; its blindness. In this

way, Loder uses the software to model a breakdown in vision, to lessen sharpness and veracity, to distort shape, and saturate hues. But rather than rendering equivalents for the various impairments to vision that her subjects might experience, she concocts an hallucination, a garish, eye-catching, hyper-visual, and perhaps ridiculous correlate to the loss of sight. Wherein all visuality collapses into mere confection for those that can see, meaningless however to those that can't see, and who are the subjects of the photographs.

She thus runs a risk in offending the sympathies of those sighted people who believe that not being able to see normally is the worst affliction in the world, or offending those who cannot see and who may feel indulged or misrepresented. But if we compare these images to other similarly digitised images by Loder - of people holding their pets, or holiday photos of exotic locations, a common interest in the impossibility of seeing things as others see them is more pronounced. In these images, the pictorial space occupied by pets, or famous tourist sights, or ethnic peoples – precisely the contested element which may appear differently to others – has been replaced by abstract distortions rendered through accumulated filters and effects. So whether remarking a physiological or species or cultural difference, Loder's work aims to represent incommensurable visions of the world. At which point the predominance of visual means fails in its supposedly universal relevance and appeal.

It's perhaps more obvious in images where one grossly distorted element (such as the shape of a dog in its owner's arms) sits within an otherwise credible and coherent ground. That small fuzzy figure of pure and alluring technological effect is like a black hole, puncturing the real space through which veracity gurgles and drains like dirty bathwater into the technical unreality behind the picture surface, which is all photoshop, nuts and bolts, and which is these days behind almost every picture surface, even – it seems – behind the mental images which form in our minds; behind the blood coursing through my closed eyelids.

Stuart Koop

Crossley & Scott

Crossley Lane
Melbourne Vic 3000 Australia
Tuesday–Friday 12–5:30, Saturday 12–4
T + 61 3 9639 1624
www.crossleyscott.com.au

March 10 – April 2, 2005

all works are

1200x1600mm, Lambda digital prints, clear mounted to 6mm acrylic



thanks to bill eichhorn @ dalton fine paper for his company's continued support over the past 9 years. rob reid @ br printing, paul scott, james and darren @ image box. geoff crosby, darren sylvester, deb ostrow, george giannopolous, liz loder, otto and edwood