

# Fire in the mind

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### *Introduction: artworks between thing and event*

Imagine, for a moment, a Cézanne who, rather than attempting to picture the structure of Mont Saint-Victoire and of every part of the natural world through “the geometric forms: the cone, the cube, the cylinder, and the sphere”, instead attempted to picture it through the idea and form of fire (Cézanne 1904). Imagine that this alternate universe Cézanne took the idea of picturing the world in terms of the structure of fire, where all matter was energy, all energy was active, and all activity was a transferral of energy, both physical energy and psychic energy. This is not such a counter-intuitive proposition as it may first seem, in relation to John Peter Askew’s quarter-century long project to capture the intimate lives of a single family in Perm, Russia, and to think about our collective direction through the twenty-first century so far. Indeed Askew has predecessors in this regard even in the recent history of British art: Derek Jarman “referred to his art ‘as [a] poetry of fire ... luminous and oblique’” (Spence quoting Jarman 2021: 13). Askew’s work is, as both Cézanne’s and Jarman’s are, luminous in both the literal and metaphorical senses.

In Askew’s art, Cézanne’s extraordinary formal complexity and his poetics of light and form are married to an ethic that “warms us” by presenting something akin to an “analogue Eden, its granular pulse ... incandescent with desire for radical change”, as Rachel Spence has described Jarman’s work (Spence 2021: 13). In Askew’s, we might say there is no delight without light, nor any sense of place. Delight in the magic of the everyday runs throughout Askew’s work. Given his marked poetic capabilities, Askew is able to risk tackling motifs that lesser artists would undoubtedly avoid. In other hands, a field of sunflowers in brilliant sunshine, or a sunset could risk becoming cloying, clichéd or sentimental. It is not that novel motifs are needed to prompt artistry, but the opposite: that it is those subjects that are already over-familiar that must be reimagined by becoming seen both literally and metaphorically in a new light. However, what is perhaps most startling across the 150 or so works here

is their sheer affective range – from the tender to the epic, from the joyous to the grave. All of these affective states are closely related to the breadth of types of light we register, or rather enter into, in our encounter with Askew's *oeuvre*.

Askew's concerns for capturing intense affective states, and capturing highly particular light conditions, are in themselves hardly unusual amongst photographic artists. However, his overall approach to art-making is thoroughly unusual – and is very far removed from his contemporaries at Goldsmiths' College in the 1990s. His work stands in direct opposition to the sensationalist subject matter and post-pop approach in the ascendant at the beginning of his career. His work, by contrast, is created slowly, across decades; edited painstakingly, across years; and demands an equally patient, contemplative response to his poetics. It is all the more potent for this. Instead of attempting to capture media attention, Askew returns to the argument forwarded by Cézanne and the impressionists: that there is an inverse relationship between the importance of an artist's artistry, and the importance of their subject matter *per se*. The more quotidian the 'motif' an artist begins with, the greater the gifts of transformation they require, to vivify it, or capture its poetry. The quintessentially Cézannian motif is, after all, a basket of apples: objects that have no affective charge in themselves, but present an artist with the problem of capturing their shape and structure, or their weight and texture.

Askew proceeds from this precept – with thoroughly contemporary departures, and novel consequences. Mieke Bal has recently said that the nature of art is that it is "something [that should be] aptly compared to fire, because fire hovers between thing and event", just as an artwork does (Bal 2020: 13). This idea is essential to understanding Askew's work: that it exists 'between thing and event' in the world – being both a thoroughly material, indeed sculptural entity, and a 'live' process that we engage with and become part of. Askew has always, notably, understood his works as thoroughly sculptural entities, in their tangible, tactile *thingliness*. However, my understanding of them is also as events in action rather than static objects. Accordingly, I agree with Bal that we should now "take this comparison" between art and fire as our defining "conceptual metaphor" of what the art of our time most properly is

(Bal 2020: 13,14). Askew's work exemplifies precisely what such a comparison can mean.

Just as two formations of flames are never alike, being unique, unpredictable and unrepeatable, so any successful artwork is something that cannot be predicted in advance, or made subject to prescribed rules. Askew's works have to be registered as individual 'events' in themselves, precisely because 'events' are what are by definition unrepeatable and unique quantities, built in space and time. Askew's approach has very largely been to 'find' compositions in the very midst of everyday life, where the camera is his constant companion, rather than attempt to stage each composition. Each work is made anew, spontaneously captured, but only reaching a final edit after months of rumination. There is, therefore, always an element of unpredictability in Askew's process, such that each individual work adds to those before, without being determined by them. Each body of work is created anew, as if from first principles. The obvious counter-example to Askew's body of work would be Bernd and Hilla Becher's, where no spontaneity is allowed to sully the purity of the initiating concept. In Askew's work, the artist's place within a particular world *is* the concept; and if his body of work is unified as a whole, across the nearly thirty years of its making, across subjects, formats, and techniques, then it is unified by his very distinctive sensibility.

### *Other singularities*

In *We II*, we encounter a highly particular way of apprehending the world, plain and simple. We grasp what the world could be if we were given the mental space, and the emotional capacity to register what is mostly already around us: our rituals and routines; our relations to others and all of the natural world, in its infinite variety. I want to imagine Askew's sensibility as a kind of oxymoronic fire of creativity, rather than fire of destruction. As both Mieke Bal and Derek Jarman suggest, fire transforms everything it comes near, just as artworks do. Askew's works are unpredictable agents of change as forms of 'energy transfer'. The relevance and power of Bal's metaphor is that it requires us to start "viewing artworks in terms of [their] *singularity*", rather than dryly conceptual terms alone (Bal 2020: 17). For Bal, there are "strictly irreducible differences between" each works of art, even if they are all

photographs (Bal 2020: 17). This is to say of Askew's work that each is best seen as being different from its peers at the level of *being*, not only formally, or iconographically, thematically, or temporally.

This idea, too, corresponds to Askew's *modus operandi*, in which each work is seen on its own (no work sits immediately alongside any other in this book, for example, such that each is at one level, a world that is replete in its own right, and complete in and of itself). Askew's entire project can, on one level, be seen as a war against cliché, and against received readings of images as 'merely' images. This requires him, as Bal suggests, to register each photographic artwork as itself a distinct singularity. Askew's method is, broadly speaking, to illuminate the particularities of individual phenomena in their individuality. In his work there are no mere "generalizable" categories, but glorious individual humans, eggs, sunsets, occasions, fires, and winters (Bal 2020: 17). Above all, the *intensity* and specificity of individual experiences are foregrounded, such that otherwise ordinary moments are rendered as unique and as special, as they actually are. If Askew's subject matter is heterogeneous, and unable to be contained in any ordinary typological scheme, then this is the reason for his approach. There is no hierarchical distinction for him between, say, the genres of still life and portraiture, or between depicting a landscape or a cityscape.

In this regard, one of the few practices in contemporary photography that bears comparison is, however unexpectedly, Wolfgang Tillmans's. Tillmans has coined a phrase that acts as a manifesto for his work and a description about what photography can do: "if one thing matters, everything matters" (Tillmans 2003: title). This resonates closely with Askew's approach, in his continuing commitment to formal experimentation as well as in his limitless curiosity. Askew's work is similarly "far broader in scope" than an initial encounter would suggest, as Tillmans's is; both figures go beyond "draw[ing] meaning and beauty from the seemingly mundane" alone, but that idea is what we might first encounter in their work (Buck 2019 n.p.). Askew shares with Tillmans the premise that there are "no ideas but in things", as William Carlos Williams believed (Williams quoted in Spence 2017 n.p.). However, what really makes the two comparable is that Askew asks, just as Tillmans does, "in today's world of total image saturation: What makes a picture? When does a picture become

possible? And how can a mechanically produced picture — that has never even been touched by the hand of the artist — still be charged with meaning and emotion?” (Buck 2019 n.p., about Tillmans).

We can start thinking about what defines Askew’s work through one especially characteristic composition, titled ‘Slim Stalk’. We see a tall flower stem, ready to bud – and only that, not another object in sight. Such a spartan composition can only be understood in this logic, where the artist does not frame a ‘decisive’ moment so much as one of near-delirious intensity. Askew’s work asks us to attend, carefully, slowly, intently, to our encounter with *this* individual plant at *that* very specific moment. This is in part because, of course, the plant is alive just as we ourselves are, and is a being worthy of respect. This is a philosophy of being conducted through photography, in essence: one in which our place in the world is defined by the degree of respect we rightly accord to other beings in it – or not, as is the dominant position. The worldly beauty of the plant is, at that moment, wholly concealed from view, being still latent if only merely days away from its full bloom. Askew’s approach is almost close to a Jainist philosophy of beings in the world, where each *jiva* (or being) has its own discrete beauty that requires us to recognise it, and our job is to accord it our true respect. The means by which Askew reveals the beings in his work is, of course, light. All photography is by definition light recorded, captured in time, but in his work, we can begin to recognise light for what it is: as a field of energy made manifest, that reveals to us what is in the world. This is, almost akin to non-Western vitalist or pantheistic philosophies. What is true about Askew’s work is what has been said about Tillmans: that “you leave ... an exhibition ... feeling ... that reality – the tea-cup on the café counter, the expression of the woman checking out your coat — is truly marvellous” (Spence 2017 n.p.). In other words, Askew’s work vivifies and enriches your sense of what *is*, and your sense of what is possible, alike.

This entire way of thinking requires some close attention, because it is simply so far away from the dominant mode of serial production that has become the norm in contemporary art photography, in which the sequence predetermines possible meanings. Peter Osborne has convincingly claimed that the series is *the* defining means by which all contemporary art production must be understood, with photography the

model for all types of art (see Osborne 2013). Askew's oeuvre is so far from these serial protocols that have dominated contemporary art since at least the revolution of conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s that something significant is at stake in his way of working. The camera, whilst being the means of artistic creation, is not an artefact to be fetishised in and of itself. Askew's technical abilities are exceptional, having spent nearly four decades looking through a lens since his time at Goldsmiths' College; but his work remains decidedly outside any obvious photographic 'school of thought' or type of practice, both technically and ideologically. This much is crucial to understanding his entire practice.

What might also be thought crucial to understanding Askew's work are the further questions Peter Osborne has recently posed: "how are we to understand the concept of artistic form today?" (Osborne 2020: 159). This begs the question of "what are its relations to social form?" (Osborne 2020: 159). Here, the distinction between Askew's view of individual artworks, and its collective state as a single body of work is crucial. Individually, each artwork is a singularity; but collectively, that makes his oeuvre a paradoxical collective of singularities. This starts to illuminate how, when taken as a whole, Askew's entire body of work is almost akin to an allegory of an ideal social formation. As Osborne has argued, "we [should] understand social form to be immanent to artistic form" (Osborne 2020: 160). This is to believe that artistic form itself embodies an artist's reflections on a real or imagined social formation, and that the shape of their works, either individually or as a whole, are meditations on the shape of our social world. In Askew's case, his oeuvre exemplifies a world in which the individual is neither reducible to the collective nor independent of it. What is at stake in his work is that we could be "increasingly 'individual'", and become more fully "individuated" – more fully ourselves – through encountering singularities that are given their due respect (Osborne 2020: 160). The more we recognise, and respect the diversity of the world, across both the social and material world, and recognise its infinite individuation, the more we ourselves can become individuals. One of the similarities to Tillmans's approach is that this is a quasi-anarchistic philosophy which values *difference*.

### *Another politics*

Put in other terms, for Askew as for Mieke Bal, it is only the idea of the artwork as a “singularity [that] allows for an active life of the political where particularity would [otherwise] be silenced” (Bal 2020: 17). This formulation requires some unpacking, because it is fundamental to Askew’s practice. To recap the sentiment above: it is only by recognising the irreducible individuality of entities in the world, and of the individuality of works of art, that we can register the true nature of the world, in its limitless diversity. Our category system – any category system – is inadequate to the truth of the world outside of us. The climate crisis of our age is, belatedly, requiring people to recognise this more fully, as the total number of extant species diminishes exponentially in what some understand to be a ‘sixth great extinction’. It is only through recognising the fathomless complexity and interrelatedness of natural life that we can begin to show what Askew calls the proper “respect” due to each individual being, and to the natural world. This, of course, is a politico-philosophical position as much as an artistic ethos. Or rather, these two are completely inseparable. If Askew’s works are not presented in the way that many contemporary photo-artworks are – as grand commodities dominating as much wall space as possible – then this is one reason why. His works are not created to add to the material wealth of a few, but to allow us to recognise the true Ruskinian wealth of the world, as it still remains – at least for now.

This approach requires an unorthodox ontology of photography, and as I have suggested, one that is purposefully at odds with the canon of photography in contemporary art production. Askew’s photographs are the polar philosophical opposite to those of, say, Andreas Gursky. In Gursky’s work, constructed scenarios visualise diagnoses about the globalised late capitalism, as a totality. Encountering Gursky’s work, the human is all but absent, and indeed ‘the organic’ is usually voided of significance other than as a resource, even if this is not the artist’s own viewpoint. The implication of Gursky’s grandest statements is that the global economy had become a single undifferentiated whole, to which all subjects are uniformly subjugated. Humans are homogenised and radically de-subjectified, de-individuated by its effects. The peculiar form of Askew’s entire body of work, therefore proposes an alternative

to, rather than merely “re-enacts the problematic character of social form in ... early-twenty-first-century capitalism” (Osborne 2020: 161).

For Askew, by contrast, just as for vitalist thinkers from Mieke Bal through to Gilles Deleuze, art production is at its best a form of ‘radical empiricism’. It marks a commitment to knowing the world in its enormous plentitude and near-infinite diversity. What the globalisation of travel and communication calls for is, then, is an art of Deleuzian “‘superior empiricism’ that would be capable of perceiving the real ontological conditions” we collectively face, rather than one of generalisations that skate across phenomenon without ever being true to them (Zepke 2006: 81). To restate what is most essential about Askew’s project: it embodies a “critical affirmation” of individuals *qua* their individuality – whether that is a human individual, or a plant, or a particular sunset (Van Tuinen 2015: 100).

His project, in other words, can be best described as “the critical affirmation of ‘difference in itself’” in Sjoerd Van Tuinen’s phrase – meaning the difference between this particular sunset and that, rather than their grouping into categories or under concepts (Van Tuinen 2015: 100). The operative phrase here is ‘in itself’. Art, for Askew, is always a *medium of particularisation*: that is, a space where we can individuate each object in our perceptual field such that phenomena can momentarily seen for what they most truly *are* and not what they are known as conventionally. For Askew, “critical affirmation” is attending to “the selection of something in the world that is *not what the world has made it seem to be*”, such we can begin to “to find the strange in the familiar, the different in the same” (Ramey 2006: 18, 19). If it is true that “art illuminates” at all, it can only do so “by undermining our illusions about the origin and meaning of “the way the world is” (Ramey 2006: 23).

Askew’s pictures of freshly served meals, of flowers cut and growing, and of innumerable details extracted from domestic life, are each their own miniature epiphanies. To enter into Askew’s work *as events* is to share in his heightened perception, and sharpened consciousness of what is immediately to hand. Living inside these events, the feeling is of our synapses firing anew. It is to return to the understanding

that we ourselves are energy – are events in space and time, and not only objects or even mere subjects.

If Askew has looked outside the capitalist West, then this is in part because in the relatively remote city of Perm, at the very edge of Europe, there is at least something of a different “structure of capitalistic individuality as such” to that in London, or other cities whose property markets have become hyper-capitalised, or ‘financialised’ in the last two decades (Osborne 2020: 161). In Perm, as Peter Osborne suggests of a more ideal world, “the freedom of the individual as a ‘self-possessing’ subject” is necessarily differentiated, because ‘freedom’ is not constituted by immersion into the world of exchange and commodification” (Osborne *ibid*). Perm is far from an idyll, but it allows Askew to *imagine* how subjectivity itself could still be constituted on other axes entirely. At one level, Askew’s work asks us a very simple set of questions indeed: the oldest questions of Western philosophy and ethics. What is a good life? How should we live? What is that we are meant to be? In Askew’s work taken as a whole, we can imagine our lives as a long process of ‘self-realisation’ – rather than one of accumulation alone.

### *Freedom as simplicity of life*

Such ideas start to explain why Askew has, decade after decade, photographed such seemingly innocuous or undramatic motifs as pairs of eggs at a breakfast table, or events like a bucket being filled to the very brim, ready to overflow with water. These can be taken as emblems of plentitude, of course, as traditional still lives since the seventeenth century were. But they are not events that require material plentitude or financial riches: they are universal simple pleasures recognisable to everyone, equally, of whatever status or nationality. The work ‘Water Buckets’ shows us a bucket of water, full to the very brim. It is also easy to read this work as an *emblem* of purity or experience recalled with crystalline clarity. The water *is* pure, clear, clean, sufficient-unto-itself and in need of nothing else.

In another work, ‘Seed Potatoes’, we encounter an allotment owner with a metal bucket of seed potatoes to plant in the earth. Here, we can start to recognise the logic of Askew’s work as a whole. This is a truly humble activity: planting the most ba-

sic foodstuff known to Europeans. This work is both as close to Van Gogh's pantheistic, empathetic model of art as any photograph in the whole of contemporary art (see Heidegger 1964; Schapiro 1968). His treatment of the time-honoured, simple act of planting in order to harvest energy from the earth is quietly dramatized. An entirely undramatic, repetitive act is brought to a high pitch of affective charge. The background is thrown into darkness, as the camera captures few reflections from the soil, and the horizon is outside the frame. Indeed, the tonality is one borrowed from Caravaggio or early Van Gogh, and lends the scene an extraordinary poignancy. The work recalls the latter's 1883 *Two Peasant Women in the Peat Field*, now in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Dusk seems to envelop the whole event, and as a sea of soil fills the frame, no respite from the act of planting is offered. The work seems to condense the labour of ages that the act requires into one heavily potent, tautly compressed composition. One detail stands out. Oddly, right at the centre, the potatoes' roots appear to glow or radiate light, rather than reflect it. This is something I take as characteristic of Askew's works as a whole: that they have the illusion of emitting or radiating light themselves, as if lightboxes. Ordinary objects come to life under the intense gaze of the camera lens (see Franke 2010). The illumination of their roots seems to capture, or almost caricature, their vegetal life-force, as if they were possessed by a will-to-grow, just like us. This work, like many of Askew's greatest, is characterised by what feels like a form of 'animism' as well as vitalism.

### *Recomposing the world*

In Askew's work, it is as though everything that enters the frame is both alarmingly alive and seen as itself and *for* itself. Put in simple terms, Askew has the gift of rendering animal, vegetable or mineral alike as the "vibrant matter" that it truly is, but which we fail to recognise it as being throughout most of our lives (Bennett 2010: 1). Askew's ethos is, in his own words, to offer the necessary respect to humans and the material of the world alike, when both are habitually denied respect and humans and the planet are treated instrumentally, as means to the single end of profit. What Askew exploits is art's capacity for "a recomposition [of the whole world to] become possible", in Felix Guattari's terms, (Guattari 1995: 90). Only in the realm of art can we witness "a proliferation not just of the forms but of the [very] modalities of being" – such that we can see each thing in and for itself, not only as a mere means to an end

(Guattari 1995: 90). Askew's concept of art is, ultimately, that it "constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality": one in which we can, nevertheless, recognise ourselves afresh (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 142).

My suspicion is that Askew attends to the sheer variety of the world, and to the repetition of our rituals and routines precisely to forward an alternative concept of time to that associated with documentary photography. He also does so in order to pay attention to the materiality of objects, and of light itself, which he does with a sculptor's care.

Two other works are noteworthy in this regard. 'Blue Bill' parallels the potato-gathering scene tonally, in its dark, tenebrous background. Instead of flora, the central motif is fauna. We see a bird alarmingly close to the camera lens that returns our gaze with seemingly complete insouciance, treating us as its equal. The bird is sat on top of a rudimentary concrete post which, unexpectedly, seems to have an exquisite play of light on top, revealing the weight and texture of an otherwise lumpen material. In the middle of the dark, the very tips of the bird's yellow and orange feathers glow and glisten. Again, they almost radiate light and colour from their very ends, as though they had begun to illuminate the world around them. This is a study not in contrasts of tone or colour, but rather between gravity and grace. The dense, tough rain-weathered concrete sits in contrast to the almost ethereally light and intoxicatingly coloured plumage. As if by magic, the bird's eyes meld into its plumage, so that our eyes have to roam around the picture rather than rest steadily on its gaze alone. Just as with the potato planter, the composition is simplicity itself. The bird is seen both close-up and centrally, with no other focal points in the frame to speak of. The success or failure of the work rests solely on the artist's ability to render the bird's grace, and its gravity-defying wings, in a way that captures our imagination. Askew's work coaxes life from every distinctive, individual scenario. What characterises his work across his practice is an unerring ability to make the materiality of the world alarmingly vivid and present. Even a concrete post is not registered as inert in Askew's work: its grain and mass are granted a poetic life, and made tangible.

Another work, 'Orange Toothbrush' is, similarly, almost animistic in tone. We encounter a landscape from an ant's eye view, down at ground level. It is as if we are surrounded by a soaring rainforest, though in reality ordinary 'domestic' onion stalks and weeds tower over us. Again, at the very centre of the composition is a single motif. In this instance, it is a bright orange toothbrush planted into the earth. The toothbrush is stood tall, like a plant reaching for the sun, seemingly attempting to become as one with the organic world. The chemically, acidic orange sits in sharp contrast to the luscious greenery, making the scene both absurd and properly child-like. Askew's works do not have a given 'message', but it is clear in this work that humans' efforts to fill the world with our material possessions, and transform it wholesale into our own playground, are ridiculous. Unlike in the other works, there is no sensation of plenitude to be enraptured by, but one of the folly of humans' hubris in commanding all of the planet's resources for ourselves alone. Nevertheless, even this work is far from joyless: quite the contrary. Similarly, two other works are united by children's drawings of smiling faces – the makers' wit and innocence given primacy. 'Smiling Log with Moss Hat' shows us a drawing made directly on a tree trunk. 'Sand Smiley' reveals a drawing made by a hand into a pile of sand. Both faces stare out of the 'fourth wall' of the picture plane directly back at us, as if chastising us for our joylessness, even in dark times. Such works recollect David Hockney's timeless dictum that 'if you see the world as beautiful, thrilling and mysterious ... then you feel quite alive' – and his other adage that 'if you aren't playful, then you aren't alive'. In Askew's body of work, the whole world feels to be a space of play, where play is the most vital act of all.

### *Fire in the mind*

For Askew as for Plutarch, the mind is not 'a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled', not least because we ourselves are embodied energy. In this book, it is perhaps no coincidence that at least four works directly depict fire as their central motif. In 'Log Candle', set by a lakeside, we encounter a close-up of a blackened circular tree trunk that has recently been set alight. Oddly, it has been carefully cut like an orange into segments, presumably to allow flames to kindle slowly in the centre, to warm a congregation of people outdoors in the severe Russian winter. As the trunk has been cut into octagonal segments, it can contain and nestle flames within its

centre, acting as a fireplace that consumes itself in flame over time. Such an image is a magnificent pictorial metaphor for the nature of Askew's idea of art, as a place where ideas can be ignited and come to life, and where that place *is* the ideas. Askew's work lovingly portrays such acts of everyday ingenuity and inventiveness – acts that spark an idea in us rather than merely document another's imaginative dexterity. Here, it is perhaps a glorious coincidence that the cuttings into the trunk resemble the form of a conventional analogue camera's leaf shutter.

No civilisation exists without fire. Fire is the basis of its human survival. However, in Perm, in the the colder half of the year, we can see exactly how crucial fire is to every outdoor social activity from eating to play as much as to survival. The work 'After Fire' shows us a cast iron cooking pot hung underneath a pole, over logs and ash, presumably after an *al fresco* meal. Such images draw attention to simple, repetitive acts – but these are acts of caring for others, whether family or friends. Such works make the ideas of care and carefulness central to Askew's oeuvre. As above, we encounter single, central motifs, symmetrically arranged, as if returning to the pictorial strategems developed by the *plein-air* painters of the mid- to late-nineteenth century from Corot to Cézanne.

'Yellow Gloves', another image of flames, is also another image of what we might best call 'care' being performed. We see egg-yolk yellow gloves that have tended a fire and kindled it into being, but not their absent owner. We see flames underneath, but not yet a full fire. The owner must have just left, draping their gloves over a chopped log, with the flames burning directly beneath them. The work of keeping alive and keeping warm is an ongoing one – is akin a daily practice, and thus like Askew's practice of photography. The counterpart to this is 'Remains of Log Candle', which displays a tree trunk several feet tall whose burned stump is all that remains, with four charred stalagmite-like structures protruding into the air, like a monstrous castle. We are made party to energy transfers both in process, and accomplished. In the former, we encounter energy latent, as if an artist-photographer had learned the lessons of the 'arte povera' artists like Jannis Kounellis; in the latter, life is stilled, and energy spent.

### *Life, stilled*

Throughout both this volume and its partner and predecessor, *We*, (2018), Askew populates his world with a wider range of still-lives of the greatest delicacy and simplicity. One exemplary still life, 'Eggs and Potatoes', is of two freshly boiled eggs, cooked over flame, seen in close-up on the very edge of a cheerful tablecloth. The magic of the picture lies in the circular motion that we are invited to take around the picture plane. We almost certainly begin by noticing the pair of eggs at the very centre of the picture. The composition invites our gaze to wander clockwise around it, exploring the room. Adjacent is the simple, plain cooking pot. It happily sits on an orangey red plastic table which, being out of focus, resembles the flames that cooked our humble meal. The bright coloured table is thrown into relief against a darkness immediately behind, as a curtain sucks the light out of the picture. A doorway opening onto the great outdoors is at the rear – but the summer grass outside has become an abstract swirl of green, thrown wholly out of focus by the short depth of field. Withholding information makes the results feel curiously like an experiment in synaesthesia: we can almost smell the summer flowers and the fresh grass. It is also curiously haptic. Both the plate and the eggs glisten, subtly, in the afternoon light, inviting an olfactory and tactile response. The urge to reach out and grasp the perfectly formed eggs is palpable. Askew's gift here is to invest quotidian scenes with a distinctive tenor.

If two works in his series stood as polar opposites, demonstrating the artist's breadth of affective range, then the other would be 'Winter Twilight, Dogs Playing', of a walk undertaken in deepest winter, accompanied by four black dogs running and playing. The sunset is an almost iridescent, near-incandescent red-orange: the end of the day is nigh. At either side of the composition, a line of houses are blanketed in snow, their roofs covered evenly, so that the whole world is under a blanket of ice. The sky implies that the world has only just been born, with the airy canopy above our heads metaphorically on fire. Yet nevertheless, as if magically transplanted from a Caspar David Friedrich painting into real life, two crosses sit atop church steeples on the horizon, contrasting their own permanence with the few fleeting minutes of a display of lightwaves seen at their most extreme angle. My impressions are twofold. First, that this image is as much a 'still life' as the one described above: nothing, other than the

dogs, are moving very fast here, being encased in snowfall. Second, that we might alternatively describe both as 'portraits' in an expanded sense. They are portraits of particular places, rather than a single people. The intensity with which they characterise a particular moment, and a particular scene, is more akin to portraiture than any other genre: we feel a sense of recognition, and of immediacy that is seldom found in 'landscape'.

### *Out of time*

Askew's diverse pictorial strategies, a number of which are described briefly here, serve a common end. They make his works live a 'double life' or require what Griselda Pollock calls "a double perspective", where each work exists in its own time that is a permanent "present tense" (Pollock 2014: 21, 20). The fundamental condition of art – but not of photography, usually – is to exist in either our 'now', or its own 'then'. As Pollock has asked, we can ask not 'what' or 'who' a work is, but 'when': "When, for example, is Vermeer?" (Pollock 2014: 20). Askew's works in this volume were made across a full quarter-century and more, such that they span a large bulk of an adult's lifetime. Nevertheless, many of his works have a highly distinctive 'untimeliness', as successful works of art do, but which most photographs do not. These are not photographs that are 'timestamped' and tied to a single moment in time, for all their work of particularisation. Therefore we can read Askew's work as embodying a "concept of time [that is] not directional, developmental and historicist, but bending, recurring, repetitive" (Pollock 2014: 13). Similarly, Askew neither exhibits nor publishes his work chronologically. Other than the ages of the members of the Chulakov family members, we cannot distinguish 'earlier' from 'later' periods of his work. Instead, Askew emphasises "the work's presence as presentness" (Pollock 2014: 20). For Askew as for Pollock, "the capacity not to be confined in time is indeed what makes" art *qua* art, providing its defining condition: art "creates its own time-space" (Pollock 2014: 20). Conventional photography does not do this, ordinarily, but remains defined by the single moment of its inception. Each of Askew's works is a "singularity in its own time-space" – with their singularity being defined by their occupation of that time-space (Pollock 2014: 20).

One of the peculiar ways in which this plays out is in Askew's portraits of children, which frequently seem to act less as a mere description of a world as a *prefiguration* of a world-to-be. His studies of children seem to reveal the adult within the child with such alarming acuity. His portrayals of childhood as a state of being often recall one of the true masterpieces of European Romanticism, Philipp Otto Runge's *The Hülßenbeck Children*, now in Kunsthalle Hamburg. Runge's work is widely seen as the first commissioned portrait in which children's distinctive agency in the world is truly registered in European art. In Runge's work, children's state of being *as children*, rather than as mere miniature adults, is seen in painting for the first time. Askew's achievement is directly comparable. His work asks us to register what things in the world always have been, but which we have almost always failed to recognise them as. In contrast to previous portraits, Runge's children are portrayed as individuals in and of themselves, not merely versions of their parents writ small. Askew's portraits of children attribute an equal dignity and playfulness to each child subject. But more importantly, his entire oeuvre is, like Runge's, an attempt to see the world we inhabit without blinkers, without the dullness of habit, and with the freshest and most child-like of eyes possible.

The artist's powers of observation and characterisation are perhaps best revealed in this type of work. A pair of examples start to show how these strategies operate. In 'Girl in Pink', , a young blonde-haired primary school girl is seen directly from the side, as if a warrior princess sitting for a Renaissance medal. The gaiety of her costume – a matching pink T-shirt and 1930s flapper-style hat – are offset by the *gravitas* of her expression, and by the formality or even severity of the composition, like a Roman portrait bust. Nevertheless, the work possesses a touching intimacy, as though we were granted a direct line into this child's mind. Or, of course, as though the artist had granted us a premonitory window into her future. The picture is made from the child's own eye level, just as *The Hülßenbeck Children* was. The sitter is our equal from the outset, rather than any status distinction implied through the composition. It is notable that it is a female sitter who Askew grants agency and authority, as though her thoughts were of such solemn profundity they need to be monumentalised. A second, companion piece, 'Looking Out' positions another child of a similar age as the heir to Caspar David Friedrich's protagonists. We see them gazing out

contemplatively over the infinite expanse of a watery horizon, albeit from very close range, dominating the left half of the composition. The details here are almost Cartier-Bresson like: the child's eye is directly at the level of the horizon where the sea meets the sky. It is as though the individual and the ocean were united. Everything about the angular, quasi-abstract composition of this work is characteristically unorthodox. Again, the child's face is barely visible, being all but occluded when seen from a three-quarter angle. Their head is framed under a silhouetted hat, whose pointed crest makes it look like a king's crown.

If, however, there is a single image in Askew's body of work that most closely resembles *The Hülsenbeck Children* it is 'Chasing Game', picturing three cousins, in a composition of remarkable dynamism. The left half of the frame reveals three girls running diagonally towards the camera lens through a field-sized garden. Surrounding the girls are high grass and plants, grown waist-high, revealing it to be high summer. In the foreground, only feet from us, a girl with bobbed hair faces back towards her siblings, twisting into a *contrapposto* pose, her hair flying around her, obscuring her features. With astonishing perfect timing, the girl's outstretched arm is at precisely the centre point of the frame. It is again, remarkably Cartier-Bresson-like. The rhymes and harmonies of colour amplify this feeling. The purple-red of the girl's cardigan matches that of the roof of her house. The angle of her arm mirrors that of its roof line almost precisely. It is only in a split-second – in what the camera can register but which would forever elude us – that we can discover the essence of a scene. Askew offers us "new ways of being" (Zepke 2005: 2). In his work, we can remember that "art ... is where we are fully realised as human beings" (Deleuze quoted in Mitchelmore 2001 n.p.) And finally, we can imagine, for a moment, that what Cezanne did for Monte Sainte-Victoire, and what Runge did for the portrayal of children, Askew has done for the world at large. His work is a remarkable experiment in empathy that recalls Gilles Deleuze's counter-intuitive claim that "there is no intersubjectivity but an artistic one" – that the way in which we relate to others, and to the world, is itself always a form of art (Deleuze quoted in Mitchelmore 2001 n.p.).

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This text was written as the introduction to John Peter Askew's book *We II*, published by Kerber Verlag, Berlin, 2022.