

Real Time

Lee Maelzer

Nothing Gold Can Stay

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (Frost 1923: 84)*

I first encountered John Peter Askew's work at an Open Studios. There were little photographs dotted around the walls, slightly crooked, with post-It labels stuck to them. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by these pictures. John spoke of his 'Busman's Holidays' in Russia over the years and his love of snow and wide-open spaces. It seemed wildly incongruous with this industrial building in Bow. I mentioned Annelies Štrba's 'Shades of Time' and he said he'd had the book, but someone had borrowed it and it had not been returned, so I offered to lend him a copy to ensure a second meeting.

The reason that her work sprang to mind was the sense of quiet intimacy in his photographs, the way that the figures existed within the frame without the camera ever intruding upon their rest, reverie, or recreation. It is his connection with the subjects and participation in their activities over such a length of time that makes this seem so natural. The people in them love him but he is also part of the furniture, as is his ubiquitous camera. We have almost no feeling of separation between him and them...

He has never learned more than rudimentary Russian, so that his engagement with his ersatz family in Perm and those who surround them is mostly non-verbal. This seems to somehow add to the childlike wonder of the pictures. At the same time, they are a story, a utopian fiction or perhaps just focusing on the happiest aspects of these peoples' lives, that are as complex and problematic as any others. There is a considered avoidance of anything gritty, uncomfortable, confrontational, or dark. Pictures of consumerism and excessive material possessions are notable for their absence. Work when it is seen, is meaningful and pleasurable. Askew's position is not to be confused with naivety or willful ignorance rather it springs from a determination to show us what a better world might look like in his eyes. His take is a tender one that stops just short of being too sweet. The soles of the curled-up feet are a bit grubby, the white ground trodden, the toys makeshift, the fruit half eaten.

When there is eye contact with his subjects it is filled with warmth and complicity. The images of women, even when obviously filled with admiration for their beauty, are never salacious. The still lives evoke Bonnard and Vuillard, the former because of the radiant hues, the latter in his use of pattern within domestic interiors, he embraces the clashes and incongruity, weaving this into the photographs with canniness and an attuned eye for compositional geometry. In both volumes they nevertheless seem incidental rather than staged - peeled eggs, potatoes, some fish bones, made exceptional by light and colour, rather than any special opulence. Dainty details of tablecloth prints and hand-picked flowers. They invite you to slow down and notice the beauty in everything around us, no matter how slight or ephemeral. Recurring motifs of circles are everywhere, plates, buckets, pots and mugs, some dirt on a table with a smiley face drawn in it – and even the beautiful whorl of hair on the back of a young boy's head. A combination of blue and scarlet regularly dominate the colour scheme. A lot of the photographs have a serendipitous association with famous painters/paintings. There are figures by the water where the composition is so like that of Seurat's *The Bathers*; chiaroscuro images that evoke Zurbarán and Velazquez, and a woman pouring milk that can only make one think of Vermeer. The softened-off contours of the subjects often lend them an evanescent quality. There are comical pets, people at play, bucolic and domestic scenes that remind us of the joy of a summer day, fresh snow, diving into water, ripe fruit, or the rapture of a child's bite of a doughnut. They are as alien to me as pictures of Mars, but they draw me in.

In a world that is full of images revealing the ugliness and brutality of humanity, it is almost more shocking to encounter a body of work that does nothing of the sort and is filled with kindness. It occurred to me in the light of this, that to be gentle is an extreme artistic stance.

These pictures are important not just because of what the artist is looking at but what he is *looking away from*. To me, there is a sense of yearning in them - for a simpler life away from pressure, commerce, materialistic goals, and tainted nature - and for the warmth and intimacy of familial closeness. In this way I find the work poignant but still can't fight the fact that it still leaves me with a feeling of inclusion and joy, since they record genuine experiences, however idealized or ephemeral; a gilded document of the artist's time with his friends.

Looking at these photographs evokes the sensation of being 'in the moment', devoid of distraction, not weighted down by memory or dread. It's a rare and elusive thing but these pictures give us glimpses of moments of actuality: moments in real time.

Reference:

Frost, R., (1923) *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes*, New York: Henry Holt and Co.,

Lee Maelzer is London-based artist, primarily a painter although she also makes collage and video. Contrary to Askew's, her work tends towards the dystopian and uncanny, tackling often uncomfortable subjects with an attention to detail and craftsmanship. She studied at Central St Martin's College and the Royal College of Art. Maelzer is exhibited widely and internationally, with twelve solo exhibitions to date. She has also curated seven exhibitions in London and is a senior lecturer in Fine Art at the University of East London.

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