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Sue Steward / Stuart Bailes
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Skate-boards and BMX bikes might not have been obvious subjects with which to begin a gallery tour with the fine art photographer and multi-media artist Stuart Bailes, but it led to clues about the background to the intricate, intriguing, and often mystifying processes behind the photographs in his recent exhibition at [Edel Assanti](#) in London.

Casting an eye around the gallery, the effect was of a cluster of abstract photographs, perfectly and meticulously hand-printed (everything analogue), involving controlled lighting associated with the still-life tradition and calculated compositions as coolly detached as laboratory experiments.

The gallery's white walls served as a perfect background for Bailes' darkly glowing images which are often hard to pin down and sometimes seem to exist as reflections; intangible objects created with space, light and form. In a brief statement, he explained: "I am interested in the mechanics of the image. I want to know what something will look like as a photograph. What form does a code or symbol take? How does an encounter appear to us?"

In conversation, Bailes floats abstract questions to himself into the air; philosophical queries loop in circles with everyday terms weaving abstract and descriptive revelations about his processes and intentions.

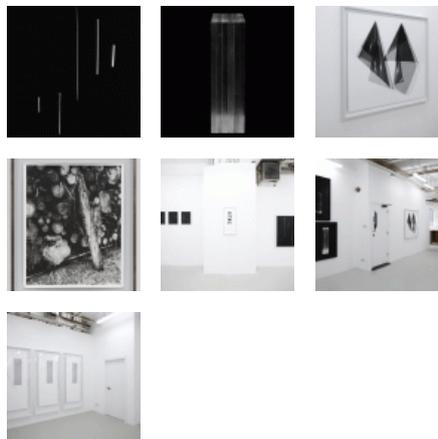
Returning to the BMX bikes and skate boards, he revealed that 'A' levels in photography and graphic design established an attachment to the formal element of future works. "I was interested in navigating the streets and interpreting the objects we encountered. It was a great way of looking and I think I carried that on into photography. Translating the forms on the street into something other than what they were made for – hand-rails and marble ledges are made to look solid but you notice how they are formed out of a lot of geometric shapes. We got into making our own jumps and having a feel for how far the gap can be; the construction was very mathematical."

Connections from that time still flow through today's explorations of space and form. "I see it in terms of my interests in all aspects of objects and composition, from that early consideration of translating forms into something else."

Bailes' series titled *Recovery* (2011) is presented as a row of silver gelatin prints whose shiny black surfaces appear to have sustained cuts by a fine razor blade – as if Lucio Fontana had been at work to allow light of different intensities to shoot through the blackness. There is a musicality to these works, an imagined Minimalist soundtrack or the repeated rhythm patterns of Michael Nyman, in a synaesthetic relationship between image and music. Close observation reveals one dazzling line turned at an angle like the corner of a box lid or book page, and suddenly the insubstantiality vanishes, a third dimension emerges and the optical effect implies a tangible object rather than a creation involving only light and space. "These are photographs of objects I arranged in the studio," Bailes said, "Then I created the effect with a single light source. I didn't shoot the pictures in the way that they are displayed, they are rotated 90 degrees anti-clockwise."

Bailes shared the musical suggestion and revealed that he also works as a lighting designer in performances with the German pianist, Nils Frahm. "Although he's playing piano and I'm making photographs, there is a sensitivity that we both adhere to and both of us are using analogue technology in our media. [The collaboration is] very much about the feel of the construction, the mechanics and the emotion of the piano: he records with sounds of the piano, the foot pedal and the creaking chair in the same way that I make the mistakes in my printing part of my compositions and the fact of the three dimensions."

An installation commissioned in 2011 [by INTEL and Jotta] for



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a London church, saw *Recovery* re-titled as *Re-Mastered*. Here, a large number of prints were propped up like jet-black tombstones on the stone floor and this time, the perforated ‘slits’ were even more convincing, as if cut into the tombstones like medieval windows to allow sun rays through – and lit from behind. Illusion of course: the light was embedded in the photograph.

Light is key to Bailes’ work and in a 2009 interview, he cited inspiration from James Turrell and Anthony McCall: “These guys harness light in the best possible ways making light and maths the material of their work. I love lights and I love numbers.” With *Vessel* (2011) the subject/object was obviously photographed, and Bailes laughs at “another analogy for photography and the object within it – which is, of course, light. That’s my reason for the title: the photograph contains the object in the image and the light which enables it to be seen.”

Bailes’ current projects have a feel of McCall but are decidedly less sensual or detached. McCall’s 1970s pieces involve [cones of mist](#) passing through light to create what imaginary substance he calls “membranes of light.” Human figures walking amongst them add scale – something absent in Bailes’ work and which adds to the exciting confusion. *Vessel* (2011) is a photograph of a floating sculpture constructed from pieces of transparent perspex sheets [5 x 10 x 0.5 cm] and glued together. Carefully lit and exploiting the material’s transparency, it reveals the texture of the cloth on which the object is placed and the dust specks on it. Scale, lighting and dimensions are impossible to gauge and he asks himself “How do we use photographs so much to understand our thinking when, like this, it’s not what it seems but it is real!”

There is similarity in László Moholy-Nagy’s 1922 wood-cut, *Composition*, where two transparent, standing stones float in black, speckled space, their edges outlined by ‘light’ and perspective confirmed by the presence of the bright, clean, reverse ‘L.’

The trickery and deception involved in Bailes’ work is an irresistible aspect of it. With *The Informants*’ (2012) strong narrative element, the transparent origami-like construction floating like an undulating sea creature is actually hand-made with folded sheets of the coloured perspex gels used in studio-lighting for (analogue) still-life photography. Their tangible reality and overlapping corners build layers in triangular and other geometric shapes suggestive of paintings and collages by the Constructivist – Supremacists, particularly Malevich, El Lissitzky and Popova who similarly tried to expose the third dimension in the 1920s.

The intimacy between these overlapping gels serves well as a huddle of suspicious, sinister whisperers. Bailes again sees the imperfections here – the dust and the scratches and wonky shapes – and sees them as enhancing reality. “The photograph is perfect but the material is imperfect. I enjoy that because it attempts to remove the photograph from reputable perfection and offer some sort of tactile experience.”

The sense of dimension and the “Photography is still not 3-dimensional” discussion seems to link Bailes’ way of thinking to how we currently experience photographs: “I am adapting ideas that the Minimalist sculptors were discussing in relation to photography in the 60s,” he says, “Questions being asked now, ‘When is it Art and when a document of Art?’ came [to me] through looking at pictures which document, and how certain photographers’ approach is to become a work of art in itself: they take on the sensibilities, the characteristics, the concepts, and the conceptual space of that sculpture, of that art work, and it becomes itself”.

Work by performance artists in the conceptual art movement existed only through photographs – and as Bailes points out, many people today experience art and installation through photographs viewed on a web site, not a gallery; “photographs are very much installation pictures.” That is precisely the case with the exhibits titled *The Empiricist* and *Flags* which are also most literal and healthily incongruous. *The Empiricist* (2011) loops back to Bailes’ earliest works shot at night and out of doors amongst grassy lanes. Scale was never clear. Here, the subject is shockingly ordinary: a log pile. Spotted during a long walk, he shot it full-on, creating flatness and indulging in the patterned whirl of the age rings and circles. He also intervened by picking up a branch and propping it at an angle against the logs. Bisecting the frame was an obvious reference to classical art composition and it broke the original, less interesting design. However to Bailes, it also revealed a binary coding – the dots and dashes of Morse – in the scene.

The Empiricist (2011) seen in this context highlights the differences between the untidy rough textures of logs and the clarity, polish and

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calculated perfection of photographs created in his studio. But being a touchable object, the photograph is no less 'real.' Similarly created with an existing object, the Polaroid series titled *Flags* (2012) is converted into an abstract which holds the story. Bailes' draining them of colour is a brilliant move as colour, of course, is an identifier. Here, form is the central issue: each waving flag is frozen as an abstract, sculpted shape devoid of its third dimension and flattened by being converted into a photographic print. "I was thinking about the form of the flag and how we think we know what a flag looks like but [it] is constantly re-forming itself. I like that as a metaphor for the photograph. I took lots of pictures with the 5x4 medium format camera but somehow the images from the negatives looked too polished; I wanted to still get through this idea of the wind, the movement, the experience of my being there, all different from my other work – and a bit more human!"

The ultimate image in this exhibition stands out from the collection by occupying the end wall and closing the show. The triptych titled *21-Delta 1965* is named after a trig point code used by surveyors and presented as a line of three tall, monolithic panels standing against the wall's whiteness, the raw industrial piping and wiring, and each work's white frames, all of which become part of the installation. Each hand-painted, pale grey panel has black string pinned and stretched between moments like triangulation trig points on a surveyor's site, creating a map-like effect and a tension between the triangles and spaces and otherwise empty geometry.

Unlike the purely photographic works in this exhibition, *21-Delta 1965* is undeniably, visibly 3-D, confirmed by the physical presence of string lying above the surface of the 'canvas.' Bailes explained that part of the piece is a print from a photo negative made of a picture of his studio wall and created for its composition. "The camera was straight on and the material unpretentious, and yet I still feel something that it's not what I saw in the studio. The transformation of photography does something else to it, elevates it; it becomes much more than it is. Thing of the logs."

The grey square, suggesting Malevich's geometric paintings and Bailes' interest in the Supremacists' skilful design and use of space and depth, is painted on the wall; this explains the jaggedy edge made "with my bad masking tape skills; I really like the texture and the individuality. And because it's straddling the border between a drawing and a sculpture and comes very close to the essence of a drawing of simple marks on a surface. But at the same time, it is presented in such a weighted mass with the huge frame and the fact that there are three of them."

Finishing the journey around the gallery, Bailes summarises, "I'm really interested in the mistakes of the medium, that's why I am also working optically. Although it takes some control and [I] can understand the process and the tools, there is still a lot I can't control – and I like that. That's photography doing what it does."

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