

Review of *Jonny Lyons: Dream Easy* (Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh – 6<sup>th</sup> February to 26<sup>th</sup> March 2016), published in *Studies in Photography*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (July 2016)

Neverland and the Lost Boys; present-day Scotland and photographer Jonny Lyons. Two superficially unrelated pairings. How, then, are they connected? *Dream Easy*, the recent exhibition of work by Lyons at Edinburgh's Ingleby Gallery, is the key to appreciating the juxtaposition. In the fantasy realm of Neverland (where adult supervision is absent) the Lost Boys thrive on mischief and games, while in parks, fields, and back roads around Scotland, Lyons refashions their juvenile anarchy as performances – caught on camera – that invite us to meditate on the loss of innocence and the pressures of adult life. Having graduated from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in 2013, and with a number of awards and residencies already under his belt, Lyons presents us here, in his first solo exhibition, with a sharp and assured visual exploration of what happens when child's play no longer belongs exclusively to children.

Take, for instance, the work that greets viewers upon entering the gallery. Entitled *At Amber* (2015), it is a photographic diptych: in the left-hand image, Lyons sits in a director's chair in the middle of a rural lane, legs akimbo, face displaying an expression of helpless shock as the chair tips back at an acute angle, heading for the ground; in the right-hand image, we see the aftermath of this botched experiment – the chair has toppled onto the road and Lyons lies prostrate, back to the camera. The images are both familiar and unexpected. We recognise that the set-up is a balancing act – of the kind one might expect from a schoolchild trying to impress their peers in the classroom – and it has gone wrong. Such is the familiarity. The unexpectedness lies in the fact that this trick has been attempted by an adult and in more exceptional circumstances: there is no-one here to perform for, only the camera.

Juxtaposition is a crucial element in the success of the exhibition. In every case (bar one) the images presented form a diptych or triptych. Clearly, these works are not meant to stand alone. They capitalise on interplay – not only between one image and another, but also in terms of how they mix media (photography, film, performance, sculpture). In the upstairs gallery at Ingleby, this interplay really comes into its own. Alongside the mounted photographic works, handmade devices are laid out on the gallery floor beside the relevant set of images. A wooden air gun, a

handcrafted bazooka canon, and an ersatz firework rig make up just half of the meticulously crafted props featured both in and alongside these works. If the humour of Lyons' constructed scenarios was not already obvious enough, these sculptural elements – displayed as a tangible remnant of the captured act (the cause of the effect, as it were) – allow viewers to have their own close encounters with the absurd quality of the performances.

Importantly, despite often being comic, the absurdity of these images is not without meaning. In *Oxford* (2016), for example, the image of the artist perched on an impossibly lofty park bench at the edge of a lake certainly raises a chuckle (How did he get up there? How will he get down?), but there is a disquieting element to the situation, too: the snow is falling thick and fast around him, meaning that – unless he takes a leap and hopes for the best – he might be left out in the cold. In the biography on his website, Lyons describes his work as capturing the spirit of “Lost Boys putting their most dangerous, outlandish ideas into practice and, with a bit of luck, getting away with it.” This element of chance and uncertainty makes the prospect of failure inherent to every action. Indeed, recording these performances using analogue photography means that the spirit of uncertainty is powerfully maintained: these are snapshots of a trajectory of action but they only relay ‘cause’ and ‘effect.’ Subsequently, Lyons' mischievous games take on a more pressing significance: this is not Neverland, where consequences are irrelevant, but rather the real world, where seemingly innocent diversions play against the exigencies of adult life and remind us that there is often a price to taking risks.

Nevertheless, in the works exhibited in *Dream Easy* the risks usually pay off and the fact that Lyons manages to link his reflections on the fragility of boyish adventure with an obvious attempt to amuse his audience speaks to the wit and cleverness of his images. Particularly likely to raise a smile is *Enjoy the Mellow* (2013), the only film-based work in the exhibition. It has Lyons straddling a plank of wood above still waters as he saws and saws until it splits and he is sent hurtling downwards into the blue with a splash. In response, viewers might easily call to mind early silent cinema and the unique comedy of Chaplin and the Keystone Cops. The same is true of *Hoppickers* (2016), a photographic triptych that charts the progress (and eventual failure) of Lyons' attempt to use an outlandishly large pair of crutches to make his getaway from the high branch of a snow-covered tree. In the case of both works, the props – saw and crutches, respectively – are presented alongside the images,

compounding our understanding of the tangible hazards involved in these slapstick scenarios.

Looking for further layers of reference, there are plenty to be found. A sense of the surreal is powerfully evoked in *The Sheltering Sky* (2014) and *Miraculous Accumulator* (2013), which encapsulate the quality of the *explosante-fixe* described by André Breton in his surrealist novel *L'Amour Fou*: it conveys not movement itself, but rather the expiration of movement. Both are diptychs, and in each case the second image of the pair fixes in photographic print the moment immediately following the detonation of a makeshift incendiary device. They are, in other words, the perfect distillation of the *explosante-fixe*. Lyons' titles are also suggestive: *Peace Be With You, And Also With Me* (2013) is a playful modification of the liturgical salutation, while *The Sheltering Sky* directly borrows the title of Paul Bowles' 1949 novel about existential despair (a shrewd link to the interrogative current underlying Lyons' work). In content, too, *Peace Be With You...* is referential, presenting a modern day take on the tale of William Tell with the infamous apple here replaced by a beer bottle.

The exhibition as a whole attests that the future of Scottish photography is safe in the hands of artists like Lyons. Creating original works that deal with contemporary themes, the young photographer delivers an oeuvre that is coherent in its dedication to playfulness – which in turn acts as the vehicle for more serious considerations and subtle allusions. The dialogue between images, between media, between wit and earnestness, cause and effect, artist and viewer, camera and subject, innovation and reference is to be commended – these works are nothing if not richly layered. And the show's real triumph is that, in its own distinctive way, it reminds us that we should indeed 'dream easy' because reality – with its rules, boundaries, and expectations – is so often hard.

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