

“Calum Colvin and the Postmodern Turn,” published in *Calum Colvin: The Magic Box* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printmakers, 2014)

In a 1994 interview, published in *Transcript*, Calum Colvin stated that he was ‘uncomfortable with the term postmodern’ despite some critics having applied it to his work. Given this, it may seem futile to try to analyse Colvin’s images within a postmodern frame. However, the suggestion that his works display some of the markers of the ‘movement’ has arisen more than once in the scholarship surrounding his oeuvre. We might ask ourselves, therefore, if the artist’s own discomfort at the term ‘postmodern’ should be overlooked in favour of a more objective consideration of his photographs in relation to this critical turn. Certainly his images raise issues of originality, authenticity, the mixing of media, the morphing of narrative, and indeed the role of the artist – all of which are connected to the postmodern. But it is possible – perhaps even probable, given his own feelings on the matter – that if we focus too much on the idea of Colvin as a photographer with postmodern concerns, we lose the real significance and impact of his images.

Colvin’s output has been substantial and varied but it is profitable to focus on the seminal works included in the 1986 exhibition *Constructed Narratives*. Though early works, they are typical of the style of image Colvin has explored and seem appropriate to this analysis because their timing – the 1980s – was the era when postmodernism, as a critical discourse, dominated the art world. Indeed, it is these ‘constructed’ images, incorporating painting and found objects into a kind of photographic stage set, that seem to have been most frequently talked of in relation to the notion of postmodernism in Colvin’s work.

In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Linda Hutcheon suggests that postmodernism in art and literature generally manifests itself as a 'self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement,' the intention of which is to emphasise or destabilise the themes under review. This is a useful explanation in that it attempts to provide a rubric for postmodern production and its goals. Encapsulated within the very word 'post-modernism' is the suggestion of a moving beyond 'modernist' hegemony and, as such, it is not hard to see why contradiction and subversion might be crucial methods in the pursuit of a postmodern aesthetic. Indeed, these strategies are part of the reason why photography, particularly, has been hailed as a postmodern medium: because photographs are created mechanically and can therefore be infinitely reproduced, they contradict and subvert the notion of a 'unique' work of art.

Nevertheless, we can be even more specific about techniques common to postmodern photography. In abandoning the formalist associations of modernism, such photography often displays an amalgamation of high-art and mass cultural forms. There is also a tendency towards the mixing of media, usually text and image – as in the works of Barbara Kruger. Appropriation is perhaps the most obvious postmodern strategy, exhibited in the works of figures like Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman, who borrow from both cultural and art history in their photographs in order to question the originality and authenticity of social experience and production. Often there is an element of irony and parody involved, a subtle way of enacting the kind of subversion and contradiction we now understand as inherent to postmodern practices.

In all of this, we must also consider where the photographer stands as originator of the work and where the photograph stands as work of art. For the implication with postmodernism is that the photographer facilitates revelations about the constructedness of nature, and that the images produced are not works of art in the traditional sense but are, rather, intended to be probed for the cultural and political insights they allow. This has the tendency to preclude a visual reading that takes into account the possibility of personal narrative and of significant labour on the part of the photographer. And it is here, particularly, that we begin to run into problems with the thesis that Colvin's photographs can be called 'postmodern.'

Evidently, Colvin works not only as a photographer, but he also displays his talents as painter and sculptor in the construction of his stage-sets. It is true, then, that the borders between the media in Colvin's photographs appear indistinct – we might, in fact, be forgiven for thinking that they are paintings at first glance. Indeed by including painting and sculptural elements in his photographs, thus referencing the long-established high art traditions, he may well intend to destabilise the hierarchy of artistic modes that has existed for centuries – undoubtedly a postmodern aim. But I would argue that we can interpret Colvin's combining of these various media as a critique of postmodernism in both painting and photography, as much as an example of this model. Rather than photographing the canonical works he appropriates, as Sherrie Levine does most famously in her image *After Walker Evans* (1981), Colvin instead takes up his paintbrush and reproduces them by hand, not in their totality but in quoted form, thus resisting the direct and mechanical cultural referencing so often enacted in postmodern photography. And rather than simply producing a figurative painting, he swathes it across a

backdrop of found items and photographs it, thus establishing a tension between and amongst the various artistic practices of postmodernism.

However, his intentions in employing both of these methods are perhaps more innocent than a postmodern reading would suggest. For, if we return to Colvin's personal history, we find that his initial training was in sculpture. Consequently, given his acknowledged uncertainty about the label 'postmodern' being attached to his works, we might view his mixing of media as a chance to utilise his various skills in an exploration of the interplay between formats – more concerned with spatial relationships and the viewing experience than with postmodern subversion. This is further corroborated by Colvin's own suggestion in the 1994 *Transcript* interview that the inclusion of certain elements in his images is often the result of accident and coincidence, as is the case with the quotation of Botticelli's work in *Death of Venus* (1986) – he found a postcard version of the original on the street in London and decided to make it a component of this piece.

Finally, we can move to reflect on the symbolic and thematic concerns of Colvin's works. Several scholars have identified a preoccupation with the signs, or the 'myth,' of Scottishness in his photographs. Amongst the images that constitute the *Constructed Narratives* exhibition, this is nowhere more obvious than in *The Beastie* (1985). The title is a reference to the Robert Burns poem, *To a Louse*, and thus a connection is immediately established to the figure of the Scottish artist. In the imagery of the photograph itself, markers of Scottishness proliferate: there is an Irn Bru can, discarded whisky bottle caps, and the kilted Action Man – who is a feature of the majority of these early works – significantly stripped bare in this image. Juxtaposed with these are photographic slides hinting towards the idea of nature and biology,

an off-the-hook telephone implying lack of communication, a newspaper with the headline 'We only kill each other,' and a lampshade cresting the head of the human figure, punning on the idea of the Enlightenment. Then, in case we needed any more of a hint that this image is a comment on masculine Scottish identity, the book at the forefront of the photograph lies open at a page detailing "Masculine Traits of Character." These juxtapositions seem to intimate the contradictory nature of that identity in which the Scottish male can be both an Enlightened, creative, and expressive figure and simultaneously possess the less compelling qualities of the 'beastie.'

In an essay in the recent book, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion* (2011), Paul Jobling asserts that the approach displayed by postmodern photographers towards identities is typified by a deconstructive penchant for 'double-dealing' – that sense of a thing being 'itself' and 'another.' It is obvious that Colvin is concerned with notions of identity and of nationalism, and the contradictions involved in his visual exploration of these issues might suggest a play with 'double-dealing.' However, it is important to consider in this context another of the artist's own observations, this time on the issue of cultural identity: 'So much of Scottish culture is based on not quite the truth.' In anything where the truth is not concrete, contradictions must be involved. Therefore, in seeming to double-deal, Colvin's intention is not to offer a deconstructive postmodern critique of Scottish identity but, paradoxically, to show something vital about it – the mythic quality, related to history and to fiction, that makes it so hard to pin down. Indeed there is a strong sense in which Colvin's exploration of Scottishness and its contingent parts has personal significance, not least because the Action Man figure comes to be seen as a kind of *alter ego* for the artist. This is most obvious in the 1986 work, *Explorer II*.

In *Explorer II* we are presented again with the figure of the Action Man but, where before he had been posed in a commanding position, here we see him supine and vulnerable, missing one boot and set adrift in a sea of uncertainty. The photograph was created at the time when Colvin had moved from Dundee to London to formally begin studying photography at the RCA and the sense of displacement and alienation he experienced comes through strongly in the imagery. Signifiers of Scottishness are once again present in the form of the Irn Bru can and whisky bottle but here they, like the Action Man, are lost at sea. The open book upon which the Action Man is spread-eagled compounds for us the idea that this image is about an uneasy separation from the familiarity of home – the title on the page simply reads “Exiles.” Consequently, as James Lawson has noted, Colvin presents his works in terms of a simultaneous connection with personal issues and with more public and cultural anxieties.

Moreover, Colvin’s use of visual puns is particularly effective in drawing attention to the theme of exile and its broader applicability: the fire emanating from the finger of the Poseidon-like figure threatens to cut the Action Man’s harnessing rope, therein rendering him ‘cut adrift,’ and the other dolls floating in the painted waves are redolent of the idea of being ‘at sea’ and being ‘dead in the water.’ Wit and irony is something that recurs throughout the works in the *Constructed Narratives* series and there is the potential for it to be seen as a postmodern device for subversion but, in *Explorer II* especially, Colvin seems to employ it not as a destabilising element but a universalising one. As he himself remarked in the *Transcript* interview, ‘humour is a great leveller.’ Hence the personal and humorous facets to Colvin’s work, which bridge the gap between private and public concerns, again move it beyond a straightforward ‘postmodern’ reading.

Indeed in trying to exercise a postmodern interpretation of his work, we risk losing his subtle intimations of memory and nostalgia – of personal narrative – amongst the broader allusions to cultural estrangement.

Evidently, the relationship of Colvin's photographic works to the various tropes of postmodernism is a complicated one. Certainly, there are elements in his images that hint towards a postmodern trope, but there is always a problematic aspect to our reading of these photographs as postmodern. What he seems far more interested in is the games to be played by constructing enigmatic but playful scenes that require the viewer to puzzle through the various compositional and symbolic mysteries of the image as a whole. This open-ended, disruptive, and disrupted narrative of incidence and coincidence is surely his greatest triumph.

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