

FINANCIAL TIMES

Richard Learoyd: Dark Mirror, V&A, London — ‘Powerfully evocative’

Francis Hodgson
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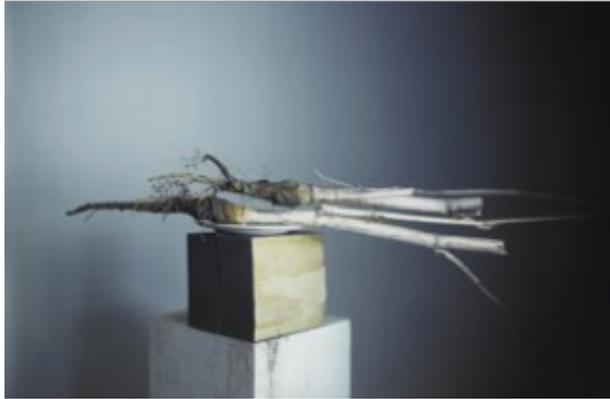
Richard Learoyd's 'Horizontal Male Nude' (2011)

Richard Learoyd is a British art photographer of great talent and increasing sure-footedness. In a magnificent show of some 20 very large pictures at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, he gives a fine demonstration of one way to go about reclaiming photography from the slipperiness of digital. The pictures are mainly studies of people, clad or nude, more or less life-size. Like Frank Auerbach or Lucian Freud, he has a trusted cast of recurring sitters and these he photographs in eerie poise, isolated on a plain background, normally a single figure at a time. Sometimes he makes still life, too.

Learoyd has developed a painstaking process, and every detail in the finished picture bears some relation to his method. He makes direct positive prints in a camera obscura. That is, he exposes large sheets of special photo paper directly to the light in a room-sized camera, and processes that paper one sheet at a time. That his paper, Ilfochrome, is no longer manufactured adds to the antiquarian aura of his whole enterprise.

His pictures are slow to make, which means sitters have to sit for a long while. That in turn affects how they look. They have no negative; therefore each print is unique. That is a throwback to the very earliest days of photography, for Daguerre's process made unique positives on shiny surfaces. They are reversed, so his subjects appear as they do in a mirror, not as they appear to their friends. They also have remarkably little photographic grain, because there is no transfer from negative to print via an enlarger. They have a very shallow depth of field (that means that the tip of a nose can be in sharp focus when the nostril behind it is already in the blurry zone and the cheek well out).

On the other hand, the huge size of the light-sensitive surface means that an enormous amount of visual information is gathered in those areas which are in focus. The fur of a hare seen many times larger than life is rendered in detail that Dürer or Van Eyck — precisionists both — would have envied.



Richard Learoyd's 'A More Insidious Root' (2008)

These factors constrain the range the pictures can have. There's one more: Learoyd's backgrounds are beyond neutral; they are densely blank. The depth of field is so short that nothing in the background can register in detail so the subjects of the pictures are trapped as in aspic. This atmosphere is registered in muted combinations of greys, blues and watery greens, and a peculiar effect of vignetting concentrates their colour in the middle and washes it darker towards the lower and side edges of each frame. Learoyd has found a way to record in the thickness of air itself our struggle to see through it. A surprising share of these pictures' weight is concentrated in their mysterious blank but pregnant backgrounds. (Much of that atmosphere is lost in reproduction. See one of these pictures on a page or screen and you may well not get it. See them in the gallery, and it is impossible to miss.)

So Learoyd has invented pictures in which almost forensically close seeing in one area is matched by blurry snatched-at seeing in others. One reason for his success is that that is precisely how we see in reality. It is not just by the eye — an adaptable and supple lens, but a lens all the same — that we see. The brain is engaged, too. Research has shown that we don't see what is there, as digital sensors do. We see what we can make sense of from the glimpses we can seize. And that's exactly what Learoyd's powerfully evocative techniques mimic.

The pictures that work best are those that take the fullest pleasure in these limitations. A mildly gory still-life of a horse head on a plinth, for example, doesn't work at all. Another photographer could have made exactly the same picture by any other means, and it would still have been a horse head.

Among the nudes, the ones that work, curiously, are those where you cannot see the features. Learoyd's process makes flesh really fleshy. Our gaze swims in and out of the meat of it in an intimate way. Where the face is present, there is an awkward jump between personality and extreme physicality. An older woman seen with her back to us; a younger woman photographed headless; and a reclining male nude (part Descent from the Cross, part sexually satisfied sleep) — all three share in this great revelling in fleshiness.

Where the sitter is clad, Learoyd doesn't get that uncomfortable jump at all, and then we're glad of his concentration on the face. The clothed studies are much more properly portraits, pictures of a whole character. When the flesh is obscured, he makes clothing give expression to more than just the shapes of the body. In these, the gaze of the sitter is important, and I notice that Learoyd never asks his sitters to look at the camera.

A number of these portraits, too, reach the very highest standards. They're filled with respect for the complications of being a person, and that deliberately heavy atmosphere enforces a deep stillness in the viewer. In the exhibition, nobody looks at these pictures quickly. They really are the antithesis of digital, in which immediacy and transmissibility are everything. These are slow pictures to make, and slow pictures to see. They stay in the mind, resonating.

Learoyd has introduced one further category to the works shown here. As a subset of still-life, there are three studies of mirrors. Mirrors are a laden subject in photography, and especially apt to signal a rearguard action against digital. Daguerreotypes had mirrored surfaces, and early photography was often hymned as the “mirror with a memory”. Mirrors are suggestive (obviously enough) of self- reflection. They can be made reflective with mercury or silver, both important photographic chemicals.

In one of these studies, the mirror doesn't quite reflect what we think it ought, has everything (like fingerprints) factual and detailed that photography can give, and yet is at the same time an allusive and evocative near-abstract. “Small Mirror on a Plinth” was placed at the end of the long hall filled with these very strong photographs, and may even be the best of them all.

Richard Learoyd: Dark Mirror', Victoria and Albert Museum, London, to February 14, vam.ac.uk