

Graves Gallery, Sheffield, 19 January – 29 March 2008

The narrative urge within contemporary art is inevitably different to the symbolism and storytelling impulses of the past, whose purpose was in part to supplement and reinforce the message of existing and accepted mythologies or ideologies. Less the visual translation of a given 'story', contemporary practices elude such literal 'readings' by offering individual, idiosyncratic or impenetrable glimpses of an altogether different narrative order; where the 'story' remains oblique or partial, ambiguous or unclear, hidden or somehow undeclared. The exhibition *Hidden Narratives* identifies this form of veiled storytelling as the connecting thread loosely linking a diverse and rather cursory survey of different forms of concealed narrative, and where the specificities of different registers of experience are presented at times with disturbing equivalence¹. Fairytale scenarios and fictional landscapes occupy the same space as documentary testimonies whose uneasy evidence attests to Germany's Jewish past. Coded and encrypted references within the work range from mathematics and magic, through to cloaked expressions of persecution, entrapment and violation.

These strange proximities invite closer scrutiny as to the nature of the narrative played out in each context, and further interrogation



Shizuka Yokomizo,
Stranger (8), 1999



Susan Hiller
The J-Street Project,
'(Snow
Scenes/Schneeszzenen)
Judengasse, Pretzfeld',
2003



Simon Le Ruez
Untitled (Vanity case),
2004



Simon Le Ruez

of the way that each narrative has been hidden or concealed. The gesture of hiding can function as an act of both repression and protection; of care and cruelty; of safekeeping and survival, but also one of guilt. Meanings might become lost to moments of individual forgetfulness, whilst selected histories are strategically denied – carefully eradicated by the slow creep of collective amnesia. Hidden narratives can speak then of both poetic and political motivation, where on the one hand they might defer fixed meanings in favour of the potentiality of fluid interpretation; or else signal the mute testimony of voices that have been wilfully silenced and existences that have been methodically cancelled out.

El Mañana, 2006

A number of artists in the exhibition present domestic spaces or places of inhabitation as the location of these contradictory tensions. In their work they allude to relationships brokered or broken and to lives lived or imagined. Specific and at times ambiguous conditions of existence are played out and negotiated between observers and those observed – between the powerful and the powerless.

Shizuka Yokomizo's *Stranger* series are the residue of an unspoken contractual arrangement in which the artist sends an anonymous invitation to random strangers, soliciting them 'and only them' to take part in a curious nocturnal

exchange. Each stranger is requested to stand motionless by a lighted window; staring out from their home into the inky darkness of the street. Yokomizo promises that she will be outside waiting, invisible in the shadows with her camera poised to take their portrait. The work articulates the multifaceted nature of acquiescence, for the resulting images present traces of both resistance and submission as an individual sacrifices a moment of privacy to the merciless gaze of a camera lens.

A lone woman is awkwardly caught. Still, though ill at ease. Her hands are clasped and fingers tightly lock and knot. Involuntarily she drifts towards the edge of the space, towards the wall. She seems uncomfortable but unable to resist the artist's request. Another woman gives less away. Bright light bleaches the details of her home from view and silhouettes her unfaltering body. Her gaze is fixed and unresponsive, without emotion. Yokomizo's work speaks of the unbridgeable gap between one person and another. It draws attention to the hidden narrative at the heart of even the most intimate encounter where there will always be something withheld and incommunicable.

This discrepancy between what is visible and what is not is also evident in Susan Hiller's *The J-Street Project*. Inconspicuous documentary photographs reflect spaces punctured by markers of human inhabitation, though curiously absent of human presence itself. Black telegraph poles cut through the winter scrubland. A row

of buildings shelter along the edge of a riverbank, while isolated trees huddle by a solitary bus stop. Within each image, the presence of a street sign promises to help locate and identify these unremarkable territories. This search for geographical identification is eclipsed however, as the connection between the various signs begins to register – Jüden-gasse, Judenhain, Jüdenlohweg. In this work Hiller attempts to locate and record all the existing street names in Germany that still contain the word 'Juden' or Jew and thereby pertain to a Jewish presence in the past. At the revelation of this typological order, each scene radically loses its innocence and arbitrariness. Each site trembles with the gravitas of its hidden histories, as an archaeological level of persecution and violence is unearthed. Once a marker of Jewish presence, the street signs now draw attention to the scene of a crime. Like headstones they function as memorials to a dislocated and dispersed population.

In Zarina Bhimji's work material objects are similarly called to speak of their uneasy histories, put under pressure to testify to indiscretions of the past. In 'Strange Domineering Tenderness' (1998) a worn armchair from the collection at Harewood House in Yorkshire is photographed as though from a position of kneeling, forcing the eyes of the viewer into the seat of the chair, where one might imagine the lap of its landed and powerful owner. Initial focus on the floral and threadbare fabric shifts to suggest a scene of both subservient and sexual relations, reflecting how exploitation and slavery are the buried yet inescapable histories of an imperial past.

The proximity between the idyllic and dystopian operates within Simon Le Ruez's works also, where imagined landscapes are offered as spaces of both escape and incarceration. In one work a model of a mountainous region is contained within the structure of a copper vanity case and placed high on a set of shelves away from prying eyes and fingers, in a gesture that echoes the storage and safekeeping of confidential or personal information. In 'El Mānana' (2006) an island form extends from its incongruous plinth base; a straining collar of landmass stretching upwards and ending in a flat plateau. These fictional terrains can be imagined as retreats or spaces of contemplation: a safe place beyond threat, or a hilltop spot from which to survey the surrounding territories. However the gesture of withdrawal is doubled-edged. The retreat might become tomb-like and solitude can slip towards isolation or alienation. Trapped within a glass vitrine or copper bars these landscapes simultaneously offer the promise of escape and the threat of no escape.

Collectively and in very different ways these artists' works bring to mind the manner in which the hidden narrative functions in Michael

Haneke's film *Caché* (*Hidden* 2005), where the resurfacing of the past into the present gradually unhinges the lives of the central protagonists. The protesting presence of a secret guilt is compounded by knowledge of an unnamed witness whose voyeuristic intrusions threaten to expose the buried truth. Domestic space becomes transformed into a zone of entrapment and claustrophobia, while localised events are presented as symptomatic of a more insidious cultural malaise that exposes latent fears and broader societal prejudice. Similarly in *Hidden Narratives* the viewer experiences a moment of shifting realisation, where space is convulsed by the eruption of a disturbing and dissenting past or by the threat of violation and incarceration. The initial encounter with the work gives way to a sense of lingering uneasiness, while the seemingly familiar collapses to disclose bleak histories, dystopian revelations and secretly enforced contractual binds. In this sense the viewer is called to take some responsibility for interpreting or assembling these fragmentary and partial narratives, and to bear witness to the silent or silenced testimonies present within each work.

Further information

→ [More information on Susan Hiller](#)

→ [More information on Simon Le Ruez](#)

Notes:

1. *Hidden Narratives* took place from 19 January – 29 March 2008 at Graves Gallery in Sheffield, and included work by Kate Allen, Zarina Bhimji, Peter Callesen, Oona Grimes, Susan Hiller, Sophie Lascelles, Simon Le Ruez and Shizuka Yokomizo.

Credit for Susan Hiller image

Susan Hiller, *The J. Street Project (Snow Scenes / Schneeszenen) Judengasse, Pretzfeld*, 2003 © the artist. Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London & Nottingham City Museums and Galleries

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