

Standing in St Mark's Square in Venice last week, one could not fail to notice the fact that when the Moors on the clock tower struck the hours, at least half of the thousand odd other tourists immediately hoister their cameras aloft. Quite a lot of them pointed the wrong way, being aimed at the facade of San Marco, which in any case was partially boarded up. Further confirmation, perhaps, of Susan Sontag's idea that for the most of us, the camera has come to be an instrument of defence, employed in lieu of a proper response to an unfamiliar situation. If in doubt, take a snap and then you can for ever have to hand the authentication of a past experience. We may remember less and less about the actual piece or person but we don't really care because it or they have been transmuted into a tidy rectangle of printed paper. But once we become aware of the inhibiting effect of the camera, we get correspondingly more self-conscious about using it ourselves.

What this preamble is meant to express, is the fact that, as I see it, our problems in looking at photographs get larger not smaller, as the numbers made in the twentieth century pass into the trillions. We are so used to consuming images at speed that it may come as a shock to realise that good photographs are actually really mysterious objects. Every photograph has multiple meanings and the longer we look, the more conscious we become of this potential multiplicity. Quite often they will give us an invitation to speculate and fantasise.

These photographs of Emily Andersen certainly do so. They were made over a ten year period and they cover a wide range in terms of both style and content. The earlier photographs demonstrate her level of technical accomplishment to an almost virtuoso extent. The beautiful clarity of texture of *South Of France*, with the smooth flesh of the children set against the striations of rocks and little flurries of water, give it a classic quality that compares with images produced by the great photographers in the past. A similar quality of being outside ordinary time permeates the images of the wraith-like charioteer with unleashed bulldogs in *New York Dogs Outside The Dakota*. She looks like a bizarre kind of figure to have risen from the grave in memory of a Liverpudlian hero.

The most recent photographs are less outré and I prefer them. In them she takes the notorious genre, the family snap, and turns it into something subtle and marvellous. She shows us people in their natural habitat in attitudes in which we feel instinctively that they have been taken up quite naturally. What these pictures are about are the relationships between these people and in the best, the spaces in between have become fully charged.

So who are these people? There are a couple of famous faced but even if you don't know any of them personally, (and I don't), you are aware that they have presence and that they are mostly interesting and intelligent people. My personal favourite is the one of *Lisa and Ken Vandy* on Hayling Island, 1987. Neither father nor daughter look at each other and yet each gives the impression that not only do they enjoy each other's company, but that they have a great deal of affection for each other. It is a portrait of great warmth and charm.

The family link is more evident in the appearance of *Cilla and David Ware* but in this case their facial similarity gives an edge to their separateness. They appear quite remote, each of them absorbed in their own rather melancholy reflections. It is the private quality of this image that makes it unusual. Although these people must obviously have composed themselves for the camera, they appear unaware of its

existence. Andersen has clearly given her sitters sufficient confidence almost but not quite to ignore the camera. Moreover, as one studies the photographs, one becomes increasingly aware of the level of quiet accomplishment in the technical sense. For example, the open door in this picture not only stops the composition from being oppressively frieze-like but also allows the quite dramatic lighting to appear naturalistic.

Most women would accept the idea that their early relationship with their father will colour later relationships with other men and in this exhibition, most of us will be prompted to reflect on this aspect of our personal histories. Andersen shows us all stages, so to speak, from the eighteen-month old daughter of Tom Dixon to the fully adult Louisa Lasdun engaged in animated conversation with her father Denys. For obvious reasons there are no signs of overt conflict in any of the portraits and yet there are certainly ambiguities and sometimes hints at potential struggles in the future. In fact, Andersen is particularly 'good' at children in the sense that her pictures invariably give us a strong sense of them as emergent individuals. Although Florence, in *Florence & Tom Dixon*, is tiny (and very dressed up), her father holds her with pride mixed with a certain cautious respect. In the lovely picture of *Banji & Lilly Adu* on Primrose Hill, the little girl has a solitary aura despite the fact that she has wound herself so tightly around her father's legs. He functions almost exclusively as a support for her. Similarly in *Amy & Tony Penrose*, the picture is of her at the beginning of her life; her father is seen as a silhouette, in the middle distance, on the brow of a hill. Although she may have been motionless at the moment when the shutter clicked, so great is the sense of energy that she gives off, that she seems almost to have catapulted across the dark wedge of shadow across the surface of the print.

Light plays a prominent role in many of the pictures. In the photograph of *Amaelie & Anna-Maria*, it is unclear whether Anna-Maria is engaged in closing or drawing back the curtain which bisects the picture plane. In either case however, the action can be seen as having a metaphorical significance. In *Rotraud & Tim Schnabbe*, the globe of the domestic light bulb glows brightly above the tattered spheres of a vase of sunflowers, which are beginning to disintegrate. Again the protagonists look like people of warmth and intelligence and there is a strong sense of harmony between them. This is in a sharp contrast to the feeling of alienation between Kiki & Ruth Martins. The daughter's expression is one of the strained but harmonious resignation, whereas her mother appears simply oblivious of her daughter's presence.

In *An East German Couple*, Baden-Baden meets the ferry. The stresses generated by familiar ties seem conspicuously absent and the couple regard the camera with a cheerful loucheness. Even without the accoutrement of the peculiar German bathing machine, they are plainly on holiday and out to have a good time. The odd perspective and illuminated sky of *An Angel & Three Others* gives the image a mutated but nevertheless apocalyptic quality. For some reason, it brings to mind Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*.

It has always seemed to me that one of the most interesting aspects of art in whatever media, is the extent to which it reflects a contemporary sensibility. When an artist really cares about being at the cutting edge, the corollary is that their work dates very quickly. An example of this is the film of Antonioni and it can be seen not only in terms of the overall concept of a film such as *Blow-up* but even in details of behaviour such as the way Maria Schneider's dialogue was confined to a string of 'yeahs' in *The Passenger*. There are actually very few details in Andersen's photographs that betray their date in a literal sense and yet her photographs are inescapably modern.

One of the reasons for this, I think, is their total lack of rhetoric and their sense of ease. She is of a generation which doesn't have to prove that photography can be art. Like several woman writers who have recently come to prominence - Carol Shields as an example - she takes seemingly ordinary subject matter

and treats it in an almost matter-of-fact way - and yet the longer you engage with it, the more you realise the level of intelligence and skill. Her subject matter alone is above all the complexities of human relationships, which means that she is out to show us things which are hidden from the flux of daily life. The results have a sharpness of focus which is more emotional than technical and which make them very memorable.

Fenella Crichton
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