

A NEW LOOK AT OLD PICTURES

Tom Wood - Photieman Castlefield Gallery, Manchester 6 June - 20 July

Tom Wood is best known, in Britain, for two books of photographs: *Looking for Love* (1989) and *All Zones Off Peak* (1998). The first depicts the body-crushing claustrophobia of New Brighton's now-defunct night-spot, the Chelsea Reach. Vulgar gestures and lewd expressions reign amidst the pastel shades and peroxided hair. It is, of course, the 1980s. Primarily using colour film and flash, Wood's camera is focused on the human traffic. Nevertheless, his photographs successfully evoke what they cannot show: pounding noise, stifling heat, suffocating smells, the sheer effort of lustful pursuit. The effect is exhausting, and sort of depressing. It is likely that many thirty-somethings will regard *Looking for Love* as a painful, if potent, reminder of the ill-judged social and sartorial etiquette that shaped their coming of age.

In contrast, *All Zones Off Peak* is a quieter, though still complex, body of work. Shot over fifteen years, it has as its backdrop the urban sprawl of Liverpool, and is seen from the vantage-

point of the city's buses. Despite the inclusion of locational clues and distinguishing landmarks, *All Zones Off Peak* is less about the city, and more about the people who inhabit it. The people, that is, who depend upon its public transport. Once seated on the bus they are, for the most part, absorbed in their own thoughts. Wood's fellow travellers are generally preoccupied, and a passive calm pervades many of his photographs. (The project pre-dates the mass-adoption of the mobile phone.) What makes Wood's images so compelling is the way in which his intricate compositions work to conjure the ephemera of fleeting, flitting, overlapping thoughts. The reflections and shadows and intersecting planes are analogous with the processes of the mind.

A sense of Wood's commitment to project and place is quickly evident in *Looking for Love* and *All Zones off Peak*. Both are the product of several years work and, one assumes, an extremely careful and conscientious editing process.



It was a surprise, then, to enter Castlefield Gallery in Manchester and confront a chaotic mish-mash of photographs: some colour, some monotone, some framed, some pinned to the wall. The decision to hang the photographs three or four layers 'deep' (from ceiling to floor), ensured that any sense of chronology or coherence was instantly denied the viewer.

Photieman, curated by Padraig Timoney, includes images by Wood that have not been previously exhibited, as well as some of the 'old favourites'. The quality of the work, however, is consistently and insistently excellent. The strength of individual photographs is such that, very quickly, the apparently arbitrary hang of the show ceases to detract from the pleasure that the images provide. In fact, before too long, I was able to convince myself that the arrangement of the pictures on the wall was quite inspired. On the one hand, it seemed to mirror the way in which the generic street photographer moves through time and space,

Left: Cowley, Oxford (1973)

Right: (1986)

snapping and snatching at life as it passes by. On the other, it suggested the way in which a curator searches through endless boxes of prints and files of negatives, selecting this, discarding that, juxtaposing the one with another – each new configuration providing numerous, alternative possibilities. It even reminded me of the way my brother and I would stick significant photographs and postcards to our bedroom walls: a mosaic of different formats and varied subjects which, somehow, still added up to a coherent and meaningful whole.

Wood has spent the last twenty-five years training his gaze on the day-to-day rituals of Merseyside. If his horizons sound limited, then *Photieman* reveals the diversity of his practice: the recurring motifs in Wood's photographs are mediated through a variety of photographic formats. In particular, his medium-format, colour portraits are remarkable for their intense humanity. Take, for instance, the picture of a young girl in a white, summer dress who pushes her body through the unglazed section of a derelict seaside structure. She is centrally placed within the vertical symmetry of the image, her bare arms framing her head. But, the slanting horizontals of the composition upset the vertical rhythm, and force the image slightly off-balance. What might have been a nostalgic (albeit eloquent) representation of childhood, from the distance of an adult's perspective, is suddenly and strangely rendered something else. Indeed, the angle of the camera marks a subtle shift in power. Out of the apparent informality of the image emerges the essence of their encounter – one of cocked heads and competing curiosity. The subject is not subjugated by the camera. Rather, Wood allows the child to reciprocate his gaze.

Various references and influences resound



through Wood's work: Evans, Frank, Friedlander and Eggleston. There is one photograph that would not look out of place in Nick Waplington's *Living Room* – a useful reminder that Wood does not work in isolation. For, if Wood owes something to an American tradition of documentary photography, he also shares a particularly British visual idiom with photographers such as Martin Parr, Paul Reas and Anna Fox. There are other allusions. His black and white photograph of three old ladies, striding through the park with their hats and coats and handbags, recalls the work of Tony Ray Jones. (Less-obviously, though quite persistently, it evokes August Sander's *Young Farmers in their Sunday Best*.) A colour photograph of two young boys crossing a residential street (the one seemingly hovering above the tarmac, caught by the camera in mid-air), might be read as a referential nod in the direction of Cartier-Bresson's famous decisive moment.

So what does Timoney's show tell us about

Wood's practice that we might not already know? Does it provide new insights into his work, or does it merely re-present what is already familiar and understood? In the end, its success might depend on whether or not one is interested in the photographer. Certainly, it helps to be familiar with his work, as the way in which the show is hung could easily deter the uninitiated. But, for those who enjoy and admire Wood's photography, this exhibition yields some surprises, while re-contextualising the images that have been widely published. If nothing else, *Photieman* pays tribute to Tom Wood's undeniable commitment and skill.

Jane Fletcher