

## CONTRE-JOUR / BACKLIGHTING

Natascha Stellmach is an artist who looks directly into the sun. To photograph against the light usually renders an image with a one-dimensional silhouette, instead her works go further and evoke a multitude of dimensions. Her dark and emotional investigations are a dance of image and text, in which hidden, emotive worlds are brought to life. With her background in essayist filmmaking, Stellmach's works blend documentary and fiction with a strong personal voice, utilising a constellation of media to tell intimate stories about the transience of life. It is this consistent interest in the emotional layers of her conceptual works that sets her apart.

*It is Black in Here* catalogues Stellmach's provocative storytelling oeuvre, bringing together selected photography, film and installation works from the last decade of her practice. To view the development of this artist over a decade allows us to appreciate the ideas with which she is preoccupied. As a work itself, *It is Black in Here* conjures up the abyss, confronting us with uncertainty and, possibly more fittingly, the sensation of waking from a dream. The book's cover welcomes us with an image of a reversed silhouette of children and animals beneath an archway set amongst the stars, suggesting from the outset that we are entering another world, the split second between life and death has apparently whisked us by. Like her previous artist book and installation *The Book of Back* (2007)<sup>1</sup>, this "Book of Black" invites us to come along and explore desires, dreams and darkness.

Throughout her practice photographs and prose are presented as evidence and mementos. Her photography is as vivid as the prose she incorporates into or alongside her imagery. Some works appear "found", if not staged then they have been manipulated with layers of scratches, holes, blurs, hand written captions and historical anecdotes, as if she peeled them from a family album or perhaps even the street. She could well belong to Duane Michals' family of photographic art history: the American artist's poetic work is also teamed with a serious and clever wit. In Michals' series of five silver gelatin prints titled *Grandpa goes to Heaven* (1989), there is a sequence of an older man leaving his bed, smiling and waving to his grandson as he escapes out the window.

In Stellmach's series *Maya* (2001)<sup>2</sup>, the Sanskrit term for "illusion", we see a backlit image of a sleek object with an infinity symbol—actually a lectern in a Los Angeles mausoleum—paired with the text "I sit and wait for things to happen", in this way satirically altering its meaning. Similarly in her installation *Set Me Free* (2008)<sup>3</sup>, a rolled joint containing the cremated remains of the former Nirvana front-man Kurt Cobain, is presented shrine-like with the question, "Who will smoke the ashes of Kurt Cobain?" as an opportunity to explore society's obsessions with dead celebrities. Alongside this memento mori with its suggestive title *Gone.*, is a large-scale print that shows the scattered ashes in which Stellmach wrote the words, "Set Me Free." They shyly occupy the southeast corner of the print, glowing amongst the black like a space station with a big help sign.

Stellmach's work invokes questions about the nature of memory and truth and her subjects are sometimes sardonically trashy and often sacrilegiously dark. Whether

her images are staged or documentary, whether the narrative stems from her personal experience, from collective memory or make-believe, she captures a scenario in which image and text live as one.

Stellmach's cross-cultural ties inform much of her practice. Born to German immigrants in Australia, there is a natural tendency to reference and play with the language and history of both places. Like many who grow up as children of migrants with only distant connection to the homeland, her parent's memorabilia, stories and the hearsay of others accentuated the idea of a mythic homeland. The homeland becomes a hyper-real world of the imagination; the dreams and expectations bound to this place become warped. This idea is beautifully encapsulated in the work, *Come Live in my Head* (2010)<sup>4</sup>, its mischievous title luring us into another starry landscape full of floating fortune cookies. Two paper slips are freefalling, one with: "Sei froh dass du nicht in deinen Träumen lebst" translating literally as "Be glad that you don't live in your dreams", but Stellmach is all but literal. Each text binds the twisted sweet to something negated. Something reversed. Upside down. The English thus reads, "In a parallel universe you are living in a black book of dreams. Aren't you lucky."

In earlier works, such as the photo films *How Insensitive* (2005)<sup>5</sup> and *I know you are, but what am I?* (2005)<sup>6</sup>, or the photographic series *Southern Cross* (1998–2006)<sup>7</sup>, she flirts with documentary image making and data-gathering but circumvents the images we see with fictitious stories—or are they real? In *Southern Cross* we see roadside memorials and read vignettes about the deceased that go beyond obituary or epitaph, becoming instead a socially critical commentary on the Australian psyche, its obsession with tragic heroes and its deep connection to the road. Here she transforms the cross into a grave, playing with its usual connotation as a navigational star of the southern hemisphere.

Many of Stellmach's works share a tone and subject matter with those of French artist Sophie Calle. Her images are presented as proof of our existence or as signs of truth, but the artist is often meticulously describing what her conscience sees behind the image, behind the facade. Like Calle, Stellmach harnesses words and images in order to analyse, fictionalise and reassess. And like a sleuth reporting what happens as the globe spins round, Stellmach observes from a distance, while remaining close to us. Her prose blasts through as if she is not only recollecting what she saw, but what we may feel by being there. Stellmach's work is powerful and poignant. Even when it is black in there.

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1 see p. 28–35

2 see p. 6–7

3 see p. 36–41

4 see p. 58–59

5 see p. 10–11

6 see p. 12–13

7 see p. 14–19