

BOLEE AND WORKMAN

Nostalgia isn't what it used to be¹

by Zoë Mendelson

The performed family plays board games with a perfectly shampooed dog (usually a retriever) and nobody fights over their last move. They wear primary colours and have flawless, Social Realist hair. Sometimes the same kids can be seen with a new pair of faux-suede roller skates, making the suburbs into a tame disco, taking it all in their stride with un-scabbed knees. At breakfast they pour Rice Krispies into striped bowls, and wait, heads cocked to the side for the snap and crackle (or is it *krackle* - is that too Kardashian for 1980-something?) Home for tea, these gently tousled, formerly immaculate, children get through Dairy Lea triangles, fingers of fudge, and loaves of Hovis via the soft mugging of delivery boys on bikes from rural bakeries on the hill. Mum has made something from Clothkits, the sewing machine humming over her fake swearing (oh flip, oh sugar) as similarly sparkly kids, in school uniform sing about their seemingly shared grandma, and women dressed lightly, even for June, are patted onto the stage on *Top of the Pops* to aerobic-ski their way into Christmas. A man in an ill-fitting polo neck jumps off a cliff into shark-infested waters to bring assorted milky chocolates to a manicured hand. The children from the ads jump from the sofa with dreams of adulthood adventures and sleep at night to the howl of imagined wolves. In January 1986, the-children-from-the-ads and the-children-who-wanted-to-be-the-children-from-the-ads lined up on sofas for *Newsround*, as bits of spacecraft fragmented in mid air as we tried to eat our tea. In the same year, I wore a much loved dress given to me after the filming of the Heinz spaghetti commercials my dad wrote. I was allergic to the spaghetti, which kept the dress clean. And so this is collage, and what have you done? Another year older, and a new one just begun.

The families from the ads, the knitwear catalogues and the manuals are already a collage - put together by Casting and frozen into septic togetherness. As collage hybridises, and undoes the discrete, we are left with a new 'whole'. This can unmake an original, and make its memories or purpose upset, or harder to retrieve. Time compresses, images congeal and instructions are mis-fired. In the fault-line between the 'this' and the 'that' it is easy to imagine rupture and disintegration, even if the conjoined worlds we approach are perfectly stuck together in perpetual conversation. It is the join between elements, the fault-line, that lies at the crux of collage: *coller* means 'to glue', so there is no cut or severance in the term. Here – on the edge – is where decision lies and difference is extracted or pronounced. This active notification of a distinction, between two previously disconnected elements, subjects each to a negotiation and potential transformation.

Rosalind Krauss has described the overlaying within collage as a rewriting of the ground itself. "Collage's very fullness of form is grounded in this forced impoverishment of the ground – a ground both supplemented and supplanted"². Taken metaphorically this notion of collage's rising up, or renegotiation of

¹ Graffiti cited in 'Last Word', The Times Higher Education Supplement, 12, 1 February 1974, p: 4

² Krauss, Rosalind. (1986) *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, p: 57

what lies below becomes a form of world-building predicated on erasure or substitution. To follow Krauss's logic, we find a kind of notional bubbling below the new image as it transgresses its prior life.

Within collage, the point of an element's origin can remain unknown. Its severed relationship to an original location is often substituted by a new relationship drawn across the fault-line. In this way elements hold references to their pasts but through conjoining expose this history to the evolution of a new, potentially jarring narrative: a new origin or moment of production. As an example, let's take the iconic work, *Untitled* (1976) by Linder³, which was used for the cover of Manchester punk band, The Buzzcocks' 1977 album *Orgasm Addict*. The work is comprised of collaged images, each from a lowkey source: a decapitated nude woman with mouths for nipples and with a catalogue image of an iron imposed where her head would have been. Linder's collage has been viewed within the contexts of histories of punk, histories of collage, histories of feminist art practices or histories of graphic design in Manchester in the 'seventies but it would be highly unlikely to be found located within histories of either mail order irons or pornography of the era. To think of shifts in *emergence* as the re-originating of any composite work allows the collagist to build a relationship with history – or, indeed its reimagining. For many collagists this is a determining factor in their engagement with materials and their re-appropriations. Martha Rosler talks of her collages as 'works (that) ruffle the taxonomy by which we understand our world'⁴

In some of Alexis Soul-Gray's densely watchable new works for this exhibition there is a sense of crush emerging in a carefully managed tumult of imagery and texture tousling for foreground status. We are witness to an organised parade of fallings apart and comings together as they provoke a sort of merry-go-round methodology, within which driving figures backwards through bleaching, rubbing, staining leaves them waiting in the wings, awaiting their possible return to the surface. In these complex works, erasure functions as an additive - the semi-removal of a figure or form rendering it a phantom, with much to contribute and presence enough not to be left behind. The figures in the foreground often flatten, selling us their knitwear, the organised chaos of their school play, their costumes, their t-bar shoes (with socks pulled up). The shadowy figures (left) in the behind are searching and gleaning, pulling wet blankets of paint over themselves and sneaking around wanting to be drawn further in, like understudies. The-children-from-the-ads and the-children-who-want-to-be-the-children-from-the-ads are painted differently - longing is deftly rendered as a kind of lurking or seeking, in that the wannabes are made via removal, and their un-painting or emptying of form becomes their defining characteristic. Soul-Gray talks of arranging the figures in her work as 'hosting a playdate' with the ever present possibility that it may 'end in tears.'⁵

Painting has an explicit role to play here in that it can provoke a flattening, the drawing together of worlds through their compression, at a remove materially from a photographic point of origin. As a capture technology, painting can be the future it imagines and the past within which it was made - as well as being a heterotopic container⁶ for myriad pasts of its legacies.

This year is the fortieth anniversary of the 1985 film, 'Back to the Future'⁷. For all its evident appeal as a bastion of accidental Californian vehicular time travel, it also holds an oddly potent critical message about photography. As everybody's favourite teen physicist, Marty McFly, causes then fixes the possible erasure of his parents' union (and therefore his key to selfhood), the survival of his pre-digital future is carried to him via photography. Dissolving portraits of Marty and his siblings are the measure of how much he has messed

³ Linder (Linda Sterling) Buzzcocks, *Orgasm Addict* (Poster for single distributed by United Artist Records, London), 1977

⁴ Rosler, Martha (2007), in Flood, Gioni and Hoptman (eds.) *Collage, The Un-monumental Picture*, Merrell (p: 96)

⁵ Soul-Gray, A. 2024. *A Cut Out World*. The Glasgow School of Art

⁶ Heterotopia is a concept developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault to describe worlds within worlds that mirror and upset what is outside.

⁷ Back to the Future, (1985) dir. Zemeckis, R. California, Universal Pictures

up the past, with his own existence dependent on his photographic comeback. The efforts to restore the McFly family's togetherness for all-time can be read as a route into considering how we could address the instability or existence of a photographic record. This leads to the possibility that an un-photographed event never happened at all.

I have a friend who worked in a bookshop some years ago and told the story of a parent coming in with her small child looking for books on dinosaurs. She was pointed in the direction of a few possibilities but returned to the desk for assistance. 'Why are there none with photographs in them? He wants photographs.'

Alexis Soul-Gray's work returns us to this slip in the carriage of truth, as she engages painting's flexibilities: kneading and teasing her late mother's absence and absence from images into malleable, surrogate forms. Images of mothers and children from brochures and catalogues pervade the work, as willing but vocational substitutes. If the photograph goes misty, has been erased, never existed or just won't tell the particular story that needs telling, we can seek out a cast of cut-outs and re-shape and bend the visual languages of our pasts to suit. There is no resolve or reformation of the past conjured through time travel but painting as a DeLorean for its exorcising is, here, materially exquisite, bringing us a theatre of seductive substitution. 'I attempt to find the untouchable, the impossible in the faces of these women and children, they are my mother and I, but also and at the same time, you/they/them and nothing at all.'⁸

I am reminded that nostalgia used to be thought of as an illness, so afflicting that you could die of it. Tied to home-sickness and much like melancholia, these poetic apparitions of longing, hopelessness and sadness imbued with deep thinking, have now become subsumed into contemporary mental health disorders and critical thinking, with increasingly medicalised classifications. Agnes Arnold Foster, in her book *Nostalgia: A History of a Dangerous Emotion* reminds us to be wary of reclassifying diseases of the past in order to fit them into current scientific categories. She argues for the diseases people once experienced being 'specific to the social and cultural lives they lived' and that we 'flatten the texture, richness and subtlety of our ancestors' illnesses and experiences if we try to shoehorn their world into ours.'⁹ I read this and my thoughts turn to painting and its refusal to start afresh; that it can only ever fold into itself the histories of all painting before it (for better or for worse). Should we choose to view the past and present simultaneously, rather than as *over there* or *over here*, it is the flattening itself that can provide us with texture. The shoehorning of pasts into the present, seems to be exactly what nostalgia (and painting) demands of us.

In one of Soul-Gray's most arresting paintings, a cast of characters faces forward in what looks like the curtain call for a school play or amateur production. Many of the expectant faces in this tableau vivant look out at us for approval or applause. Some of the figures are costumed, or are perhaps creatures that we only imagine to hold children inside them. Some have the irresistible guise of stickers or cyphers, adhered to the surface of the painting. In this work, the familiar and unfamiliar sit very close to each other, rubbing off on each other. I believe I was in this play. Then I realise how strange and dark it is, and that I have never seen it before.

When I was eleven I read the children's novel, *Charlotte Sometimes* by Penelope Farmer.¹⁰ Charlotte is at boarding school and sleeps in a time travelling bed. Sometimes she goes to school in 1968 (when the book was written) and sometimes in 1918, as Clare. The past is a haunting she finds, ultimately, she can't escape and her entrapment there is the crux of the story. A conceit of the novel is that Charlotte and Clare share a diary, which they each write into. This two-handed diary fascinated me, more than the warping of time. As a travelling object the diary does not leave one of its worlds or transform in order that it enters the other. It is

⁸ Soul-Gray, A. 2024. *A Cut Out World*. The Glasgow School of Art

⁹ Arnold Foster, A (2024) *Nostalgia: A History of a Dangerous Emotion*. London, Picador, p: 33

¹⁰ Farmer, P (2013) *Charlotte Sometimes*, London. Vintage Children's Classics

neither written by two people or by a single hand but by an awkward re-manifesting of Charlotte/Clare in each space-time. Soul-Gray describes her work as seeming to have been made by more than one painter, and I am reminded of Charlotte and Clare, two versions of the same person, passing their notes back and forth across worlds, neither entirely at home in their own, spreading fragments between them, picking at loss, hoping for a whole.

Dr Zoë Mendelson is an artist and writer with an expanded painting practice. Her work includes various forms of writing (fiction and non-fiction), painting, collage, drawing, installation, and singing. Mendelson has exhibited widely showing works, performing and publishing, nationally and internationally. Her work is also installed permanently (visibly and covertly) in public buildings.

Zoë's research engages disorder as a culturally produced phenomenon, in parallel to its clinical counterpart, suggesting its value to knowledge production within Fine Art and critical theory. She is interested in how culture co-opts psychological and medical motifs and spectacularises them, leading to complex and widespread mis-readings. She has a profound interest in ill-being as a place of potential agency and fascination - at odds with a current focus on well-being as a 'success' narrative.

Zoë is Head of Painting & Printmaking at The Glasgow School of Art. She is co-founder and editor of *The Edit* an online and inclusive, de-canonised bibliography for students in Fine Art and related fields, used in Arts education internationally.

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