

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

CONSTRUCTED

CALUM COLVIN

NARRATIVES

AND RON O'DONNELL

COVER: RON O'DONNELL: STILL LIFE IS ALIVE AND KICKING 1986

CONSTRUCTED

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CALUM COLVIN AND RON O'DONNELL

NARRATIVES

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

This catalogue is published in conjunction with the Stills Gallery, Edinburgh who first exhibited Ron O'Donnell's work in December 1985. That exhibition was made possible by the generous sponsorship of Kodak and printed by Eastern Photocolour Ltd., Edinburgh. Calum Colvin's work is made possible by the generous support of Chromacopy, London, and a commissioning fee from The Photographers' Gallery, London.

This catalogue is published to coincide with the first showing of this joint exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery, London from 23 May - 28 June 1986

Published by The Photographers' Gallery London © 1986

Printed by Jackson Wilson Ltd., 24 Jack Lane, Leeds LS11 5NB

ISBN 0 907879 08 X

F O R E W O R D

Constructed Narratives is an exhibition which transcends the boundaries of what previously has been considered 'pure' photography. The work of Calum Colvin and Ron O'Donnell incorporates motifs and forms from painting and sculpture and presents a holistic approach to photography placing it, in a truly integrated sense, within the context of the contemporary visual arts.

The continual debate of whether photography is art is an habitual irrelevance which all photographers who consider themselves artists and photographic galleries have to deal with. When the medium is appropriated by established artists – David Hockney, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton to name a few – this issue never arises. They can choose any medium regardless and it is still recognised as *art*. For those involved in independent photographic practice in this country it is a very different story. The pertinent fact that photography has its own aesthetic seems to have escaped most mainstream critical writing on the subject. In putting together Constructed Narratives the blurring of definitions is apparent and the semantic distinctions that many in the art establishment cling to are outdated. It is hoped that through the new work of Colvin and O'Donnell all those genuinely interested in contemporary art will see the further potential of photography and recognise its place alongside painting and sculpture.

Alexandra Noble
Exhibition Organiser



Calum Colvin: The Beastie 1986

IT'S DIFFICULT TO TALK authoritatively about the pictures of two people who are still young and relatively unknown. Although their work shares such obvious similarities and affinities, including a surprising maturity, they're still very individual artists.

They're both Scottish. At 24 Calum Colvin is 10 years younger than Ron O'Donnell. Where the older artist was self-taught, the younger was 'trained'. Both resolved their current styles at about the same time; O'Donnell in Edinburgh, Colvin while studying photography at the Royal College of Art in London. And though they took different routes, both of them reached many of the same conclusions by a similar process of rejection and synthesis. Although their work was truly incubated in Scotland it's still only as Scottish as it's American, or European, or photographic, or sculptural.

What constitutes 'Scottish-ness' is a question I've heard in connection with the young Glaswegians, Stephen Campbell and Adrian Wisniewski, whose narrative and boldly designed paintings have things in common with the constructed photographs of Colvin and O'Donnell. And when you see how these Scots have evolved from essentially the same forces as their counterparts at the forefront of the new English documentary movement, it's prudent to ask again.

In his book *1982 Janine*, Alisdair Gray has described Scottish-ness, as 'an energy' that can't be despised for it's too useful.¹ For me Scottish-ness has become most of the things that I've spoken about with these two artists – especially a Scottish upbringing, with its English-bashing folk heroes, and a sense of humour. On the other side of the coin there's our national inferiority complex, and the exile's feelings of pride and guilt. Like Calum Colvin I came to London after three years studying sculpture, only he arrived seven years after me, in 1983. I attended

Glasgow School of Art before they got their photography department. In those days sculpture was the only place that would allow you to work like your heroes – between traditional disciplines. The Practika MTL that figures prominently in Colvin's picture (*Untitled 1985*) was part of the student's kit, but even in '72, it was only bad artists who needed photographs.

Before considering what this hybrid work owes to 'traditional' British photography, and how it contributes to new directions in British photography, let's examine its roots. The constructed (or directed) photograph goes back to those wonderfully unselfconscious stereo cards of the 1850s. Manufactured in millions, for Victorian parlours, these used such techniques as staging and (when they couldn't get props) montage. Since Rodin employed photographers in the 1890s artists have been constructing for the camera.² We even know that Bill Brandt used models and sets for of few of his most powerful 'documentary' pictures in London.³

Interestingly, the different methods O'Donnell and Colvin use to construct their pictures point to two quite separate strands from the same tradition. In the European strand, running via Moholy Nagy and Bellmer to recent artists such as Bernard Faucon and George Rousse, constructing means still life. The Americans seem to have evolved an 'environmental' form from taking record snaps of environments (that offer preferential viewpoints), to altering existing spaces for the camera (with its fixed viewpoint).

With Colvin and other European constructors you don't get the sense of the past or continuity of a place that you get with O'Donnell and Americans like Sandy Skoglund and John Divola.⁴ Whether it's a room or field, *ambience* is a vital part of O'Donnell's fantasies, but not Colvin's. O'Donnell's exhibition at Stills Gallery

1 *1982 Janine*, Alisdair Gray published King Penguin 1985

2 *Les Photographes de Rodin*, Helene Pinet published in *Photographic* September 1983

3 *Behind the Camera*, Bill Brandt, Phaidon

4 More details: *The New Color*, by Sally Eanclaire, Cross River Press

contained objects used in his photographs. And the effect was very weird. So far only Edinburgh bailiffs and workies have encountered the scattered sets that have survived. Once he went back to the set of *Untitled 1983*, and discovered that a frustrated raider had torn open every last one of the mocked-up Christmas presents. By comparison Colvin's sets have shrunk to tabletop size during the past five years.

Vernacular objects are used by both artists in complex ways that refer to a lost Scotland. Colvin brings suitcases full of junk from over the border to his Wapping studio. O'Donnell goes to extreme lengths to obtain a jar bearing the same label from his childhood. Colvin's 'bonny Scotland' mementos, and his old magazines are an exile's fond reminders of home. The antiquated clutter in O'Donnell's sittingrooms are retrieved from his lost Scottish childhood. Colvin signals his absence by including the kilted Actionman ('my alter ego'), and O'Donnell fills his pictures with his children's drawings.

Both have similar working methods. Time and painstaking research go into each picture. (An eclectic magpie, O'Donnell poured over books of hieroglyphics before choosing the one for *The Antechamber of Rameses V In the Valley of The Kings*) Apart from their lighting, the construction and recording techniques are identical. Colvin transposes his figure designs by referring between the set and a rough that gets traced over the viewing screen of his 5x4-in camera. Once O'Donnell chooses his viewpoint (the camera he built himself as absent viewer) he dresses the set. He likens adding objects into the picture to painting. As self-confessed 'failed painters', both wield brushes to achieve different effects. O'Donnell harmonises while Colvin stresses.

As mentioned, both artists arrived at the same basic conclusions from different directions. Characteristically, O'Donnell likes to say that his artistic schooling was copying comics. One of his first constructed photographs – of a skeletal rabbit in a box – recalls the cartoonist's



device for illustrating an electric shock. While his earliest photographs betray the ironic influences of Walker Evans and Diane Arbus (the series on 'Circus Folk' copies Arbus's story, *Art And The Circus* done for Harper's Bazaar, 1963). Before he began constructing his photographs O'Donnell confined such visual gags to the montages he hand-coloured and rephotographed. Leading the double life of a photographic

technician and a questioning artist, O'Donnell began photographing the streets, then later interiors; first in sumptuous tones of black and white, then in colour in mid-1982, influenced by the colour work that was filtering in from America. He might be describing the impact of one of his own pictures when he remembers the effect of seeing the sharp reproductions in Joel Meyerowitz's books, *Cape Light*: "You could look at the images from a distance and see the composition, and when you got close up you could see matchsticks."

He says that making larger negatives imposed formal or 'static' pictures. A telling picture from this transitional phase, and reminiscent of a Victorian allegory, shows an empty chair placed in front of the painted backdrop of a stage. He started constructing his pictures in 1984 as a reaction against the prevailing trend in photography towards formalism – or simply photographs about photography. Although it originated in America he

perceived that the worst of it was British. Designed to be accessible, and personal (and if all else failed, entertaining), the first constructed pictures effectively combined the advantages of large format colour photography with the uninhibited freedom of montage.

Colvin started constructing after he reached a dead end with sculpture and photography. He was combining photographs and sculptures, until he saw pictures by Les Krims and George Rouse in a magazine. "I decided that I should be putting the sculptures into photographs – not the other way round." The Royal College of Art accepted him on the strength of a folio of unrepresentative black and white street pictures (interestingly this included prints of the unaltered interiors of condemned tenements).

But as soon as he was installed he resumed the construction pictures from his sculpture days. These had been taken with a square format camera and printed on fibre mono paper. They share the same fascination with two-dimensional transcription of real space that characterises the later colour versions. They contain the fixed (perpendicular) viewpoint, but here the painted outlines of figures are still anchored to the ground. The depressing sterility of the sets, with their common objects made anonymous by daubs of paint, show the influence of Rauschenberg and possibly George Segal. Colvin took his cue from Pop Art because the vogue conceptual work didn't interest him.

Unlike the well read O'Donnell, Colvin says he was completely ignorant about developments in colour photography when he started making colour

photographs. Colour meant more information and greater fidelity.

'Subjectivity' and 'colour' are the fashionable words of the new British documentary photography, that was spawned and reared in the north of England. Its most vocal practitioner, Martin Parr, says that Tony Ray Jones is the link between the old style politicised documentary photography, and the new, with its emphasis on preconception.⁶ The Scots see Duane Michals and Les Krims as the link people – but between 'art' and 'photography'. They showed that photography could be subjective and controlled – but especially humorous. Big American colour photography in the late '70s did much to break the critical consensus of the purists who supported the Weston/Strand concept of the (unmanipulated) fine print.⁷

Here in Europe during the late '70s 'photoworkers' such as John Hilliard and Jan Dibbets demonstrated that certain inherent limitations and assumptions about photography could be the springboard for ideas and images. Hilliard's 1974 *Causes of Death*, offers four alternative photographs of the same anthropomorphic object wrapped in a sheet from the same viewpoint. It uses cropping and captioning to change and subvert our interpretation of, and dependence on 'the facts'. Inevitably this sort of work questioned the 'objectivity' of photography⁸. Against this background the conscious rejection of 35mm mono street photography by Colvin and O'Donnell is as fundamental to understanding their work as their allusions to painting and photography that reinforce allegiances to a synthetic art.

Neither artist can explain why their first reaction when they got cameras was to go outside and photograph. "Maybe it's always the case that young people will start in the street and move on, as I did," says O'Donnell⁹ who simply felt that there was "too much" documentary work around. Colvin is more specific. He stopped documenting streets and derelict Dundee houses when he realised



Photograph:

Calum Colvin

6 Interview between
Martin Parr and
author, 1986

7 See A. D. Coleman
Light Readings
(pp. 191–194)

8 *Artist and
Camera*, Arts

Council of Great
Britain 1980

9 O'Donnell in
Creative Camera
December 1985

how simple it was. The turning point came when he was framing a drunk who languished in the path of oncoming traffic. "I was actually more interested in the photograph." Pricked by conscience, he moved the man to safety (the first time he'd moved anything in or out of a picture) and got slugged for this troubles.

By 1980 the failure of photo reportage to live up to its own expectations was an acknowledged fact. In his biographical book *A Tale*, François Hers¹⁰ recounts how, in 1976, a magazine inadvertently used one of his photos to justify violence. "The photo I enlarged dramatically and put on a blank museum wall, with no explanation . . . It was no longer the illustration of an event, the justification of a caption, it had become a fiction."

If it was indeed necessary to express concerns at all, it must be done ambiguously. O'Donnell's quasi-primitive pictures have always investigated social/political concerns; his 'woodland' pictures of stuffed animals could be called 'environmental', and nuclear issues have been a perennial theme. Colvin's 'politics' are refreshingly autobiographical: the RCA pictures contain veiled references to a girlfriend left at home, and later pictures with fire and water, concern personal fate.

Probably the primary Scottish constituent in these pictures is humour. Punning, parody and irony are obvious in O'Donnell's mocking titles (he poached the line, 'Still Life is Alive and Kicking' from a photographic critic) and in Colvin's flaunting of such sacred cows as Renaissance art, and even his own roots. But of course the humour is double-edged. O'Donnell's *Still Life is Alive and Kicking* parodies cubist conventions yet it's a genuine homage to one of his favourite artists, Braque – who used his signpainter's skills to create trompes l'oeil. *Doc Doc Document* mimics the whirl of thousands of motorwinders; but is the joke on amateurs or professionals? Colvin's puns run from the straightforward camera lens for an eye (*Untitled 1985*) to complex interplays between literal and represented (leading back to the fact that the photograph is

itself a representation). In *Cupid and Psyche*, the woman's 'head' rests on the arm of the chair as well as in Cupid's 'arm'. And there are further unconscious connections between palm, lap, seat, etc. His later pictures show a more sophisticated and confident synthesis of real objects and painting, with broader gestures.

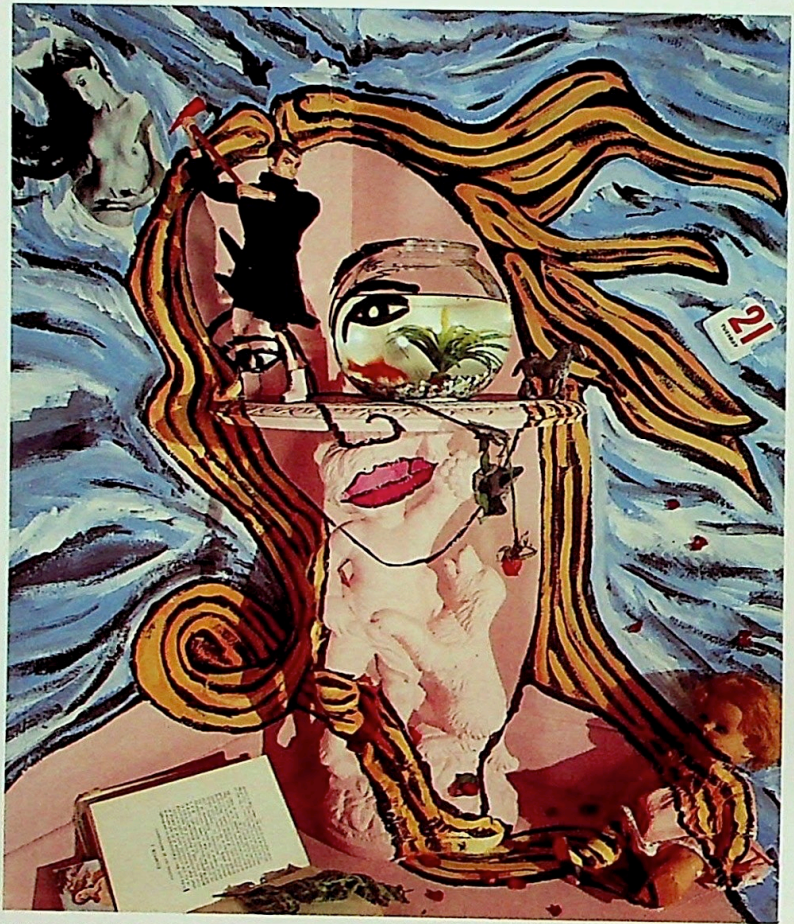
The Scots are masters of a typically dry self-deprecating humour that's capable of great subtlety and humility. It's apotheosised in the writing of Ivor Cutler (which O'Donnell knows well). His surreal 'Scotch Sittingroom'¹¹ bitterly lampoons the sensible standards of a Scottish upbringing, and could be a paradigm for O'Donnell's and Colvin's pictures. Set in a gothic never-never land, the allegory manages to be farcical, unreal yet convincing, philosophical and grotesque in equal parts, and without ever upsetting a delicate balance. Such unsettling devices as ambiguity and parody need to hang on something as reassuring and colourful as O'Donnell's fairy sets, or Colvin's floating trompe l'oeil faces. From a distance one's lighting, and the other's painting signal their own fictions, and invite closer inspection. Success depends on balancing many things: content against form, humour against seriousness, paint against light, emitted light against added light, time against instantaneity, meaning against meaning.

This is not a new brand of photography, but its vernacular elevates it above such imperatives. Ultimately it represents something vital and exciting – and I hope lasting – from the dark, introspective '70s. To new British photography it contributes a much needed dose of uninhibited non-conservatism. These artists/photographers acknowledge that photography isn't . . . any one thing, but many, and that it doesn't belong to an elite with moral prerogatives. But most of all this work can't be dismissed as something immature from an art school. I end these notes with something the late, great Orson Welles said of characters. "They don't have to be real, so long as they're truthful."

10 *A Tale*, François Hers, Thames and Hudson 1983
11 *Life in a Scotch Sittingroom*, Ivor Cutler



Ron O'Donnell: Cameo Robot 1985



Calum Colvin: The Death of Venus 1986



Calum Colvin: Cupid and Psyche 1986



Calum Colvin: Atlas 1986



Calum Colvin: Explorer II 1986



Ron O'Donnell: The Antechamber of Rameses V in the Valley of the Kings 1985



Ron O'Donnell: Doc Doc Document 1985



Ron O'Donnell: Chip Dinner 1985

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

RON O'DONNELL

CALUM COLVIN

- 1 Untitled 1984
- 2 Untitled 1985
- 3 Untitled 1985
- 4 Untitled 1985
- 5 Untitled 1985
- 6 Untitled 1985
- 7 Untitled 1985
- 8* The Death of Venus 1986
- 9 Explorer I 1986
- 10* Explorer II 1986
- 11 Explorer III 1986
- 12* Cupid and Psyche 1986
- 13* Atlas 1986
- 14* The Beastie 1986
- 15 Untitled 1986
- 16 Untitled 1986
- 17 Untitled 1986
- 18 Untitled 1986
- 19 Untitled 1986
- 20 Untitled 1986

*denotes reproduction in catalogue

- 1 Creature From The Black Lagoon 1984
- 2 Woodland Animal Series I 1984
- 3 Woodland Animal Series II 1984
- 4* Woodland Animal Series III 1984
- 5 The Sacred Heart 1985
- 6 After the Party 1985
- 7 The Conversation 1985
- 8 Jack Pumpkin Head Takes A Leak 1985
- 9 Untitled 1985
- 10 Mr Fraser's Fur Shop 1985
- 11 Untitled 1985
- 12 Untitled 1985
- 13 Odeon 2
- 14 The Discovery of Coca Cola 1985
- 15* Cameo Robot 1985
- 16 Tactical Nuclear Explosion 1985
- 17 The Flasher 1985
- 18* Doc Doc Document 1985
- 19 Untitled 1985
- 20 Frog Prince 1985
- 21* Chip Dinner 1985
- 22* The Antechamber of Rameses V
in the Valley of The Kings 1985
- 23 Untitled 1985
- 24* Still Life is Alive & Kicking 1986
- 25 The Discovery of Radium 1986
- 26 Keep The Radio Tuned For
Government Advice & Instruction 1986
- 27 Down on Manor Farm 1986

