

Revival

Roger Hargreaves sees evidence of a new dawn in black-and-white photography in the work of Hans-Christian Schink and An My Lê

Photography's mass migration across the digital frontier has left us all blinking in the sunlight of a strange new world. We're learning to adjust our ways, settle into new neighbourhoods and, as never before, gossip and bicker with the neighbours.

Thanks to the internet I can keep pace with every significant gallery and museum photography exhibition in the world. I can be book-teased with each new Parr approved 'Photobook'. If there's a calamitous event I can browse through a hundred amateur photographs a moment later to take soundings from the ground and find out just what's occurred. There were, at the last time of counting, 2.5bn digital photographs posted on Flickr and 4.5bn on Facebook.

Everyone wants in on the action, it seems. Sales of pixel-rich cameras are proving remarkably resilient to the credit crunch, at a time when the registration of new cars in the UK is said to be at the lowest level since 1966. The economy might be going to hell but some of us at least are happy to dance away in the bright and beautiful colours of Sony's Miami foam party.

Heritage

Of course the bubbles will burst and the froth will settle. And only then will we begin to look around, hankering for the old country and reflecting on the heritage we've left behind. Photography perpetually renews itself as it snakes across our culture, fattening up as it sloughs off one skin and grows another.

The desire for the newest and the freshest has at times dulled our sensibilities and the perpetual quick flick of imagery has shortened our attention span. So it's perhaps no surprise that so many

professional photographers are now applying the brakes, slowing down and seeking our attention through the newfound shock of the old.

Large format cameras are in vogue, enforcing conceptualised deliberation. The decisive moment championed by the magazine photographers of the twentieth century has been replaced by a quieter moment of reflection and anticipation. It's a strategy that draws the audience into a closer scrutiny of the image, particularly when the photographs are scaled up for the accommodating walls of the contemporary museum.

And alongside the solid blocks of colour provided by the Gurskys, Crewdsons and Dijkstras, black-and-white is also re-emerging as a medium of choice. I recently chaired the judging panel for the inaugural bi-annual ING Real Photography Award, a €50,000 prize for contemporary photography offered by the real estate development wing of the leading Dutch banking group. After sifting our way through 650 entrants the panel finally settled on a monochrome image by Hans-Christian Schink.

The photograph depicts a violent gash that streaks across the sky of an otherwise tranquil landscape. The title *9/17/2006, 8.45am - 9.45am, N 78° 13.370' E 015°40.024'* refers to the location and time the photograph was made and is neatly tailored for the internet age. Key the co-ordinates into Google Earth and you arrive at the bay outside Longyearbyen in Spitsbergen, what Wikipedia informs me is one of the world's northernmost towns and the most northerly town with a population of over 1000.

Click on to the more reliable

Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food website and you discover that the surrounding mountains have since become home to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, 'designed to store duplicates of seeds from seed collections around the globe'. The vault, high in the permafrost acts as an insurance policy against global environmental or nuclear catastrophe.

Schink's revival

In the best traditions of contemporary practice, Schink's photograph is one of a series which records the movement of the sun during a one hour exposure at different locations around the world. The streak is the effect of true solarisation, first noted by W.H. Jackson in 1857 and first described in print by H. de la Blanchère in 1859 in *L'Art du Photographe*. It is a phenomenon unique to silver bromide emulsions, in which exposure to extremely bright light causes a tonal reversal of a portion of a photographic image.

Schink was inspired in part by Minor White's photograph *Black Sun*. 'I had the photograph in a book and always loved it,' he tells me. 'I'd made a series of black-and-white photographs on industrial architecture but all my professional practice was in colour. The Minor White photograph was something that was only possible with conventional film. It was an accident. He was photographing in winter and didn't notice the shutter was frozen.'

'I experimented with different time exposures and settled on one hour as it's the most common unit of time. The plan is to make 24 one-hour photographs, 12 in the northern hemisphere and 12 in the southern hemisphere. It started with me making

Above: *Spitsbergen: 9/17/2006, 8.45am - 9.45am, N 78°13.370' E 015°40.024'*. © Hans-Christian Schink. Courtesy of Kicken Berlin Gallery/Rothamel Gallery Frankfurt am Main and Erfurt.

photographs in places I happened to be but now I'm looking for specific locations and searching on Google Earth.

A little strange

'I'm beginning to exhibit the photographs and much of the audience thinks they're a little strange. They assume the images are made digitally and

become fascinated when they discover the technical aspect of the photograph.'

In the context of an award framed around ING's prescriptive interest in nature, development and architecture, it was a remarkable image. I commented at the time that: 'Schink's photograph has reinvigorated black-and-white photography with a new con-

temporary verve and has created a visual tension that hints at trouble to come in a wilderness paradise.'

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than my fellow juror, Aperture's head of publishing Lesley Martin, was pointing me in the direction of an essay written by Charlotte Cotton in 2007: *The New Color: the return of*

black-and-white. Cotton produces some honey-like quotes buzzing around the contemporary art scene, collecting nectar from what she perceives as a new flowering of black-and-white photography.

In reference to Susan Lipper's book *Trip and Collier Schorr's Forest and Fields Volume 1*, she remarks: 'In both books, the

'People assume the images are made digitally and become fascinated when they discover the technical aspect of the photograph.'



Top: *Algeria 2: 1/09/2008, 4.38pm - 5.38pm, N 21°48.913' E 006°30.297'*. Above: *Los Angeles: 2/23/2006, 4:04pm - 5:04pm, N 34°03.712' W 118°20.979'*. Both images © Hans-Christian Schink. Right: *From 29 Palms, 2005* © An My Lê, courtesy Murray Guy, New York.

artists' astute, creative, and wilful use of the medium of monochrome at the moment of its perceived obsolescence feels incendiary.'

Drawing together the work of Osamu Kanemura, Tacita Dean, Marketa Othova, Jason Evans and An-My Lê, she concludes: 'One of the most important factors here is our visual recognition that the act of making and defining photographic practice in print form is increasingly nostalgic, and perhaps that calls for aesthetics of nostalgia.'

Nostalgia

'An aesthetics of nostalgia at monochrome's moment of perceived obsolescence' – it's a persuasive argument and one that equally resonates with the work of Chuck Close, Gary Schneider, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Steve Pippin. These artists mine the technical back catalogue and, as Pippin has it, 'the riddle of photography' to produce works which are defiantly contemporary.

For example, An My Lê's video installation *29 Palms*, which

Cotton cites in her essay, is due to appear at the Barbican in its forthcoming exhibition *On the Subject of War*. The *29 Palms* of the title refers to the Twenty-nine Palms, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, America's largest military training facility on the edge of the Mojave Desert. The video projection is deliberately channelled into black-and-white and cast across two adjoining screens.

On one screen marines are seen being briefed for the exercise, while on the other they

move as ant-like creatures, advancing through small puffs of live explosions through the desert landscape.

Our vantage point is pitched back into the nineteenth century and the war photography of Fenton, Beato and Brady.

More tellingly, the piece also evokes Gustave Le Gray's 1857 series *Cavalry Maneuvers, Camp de Châlons*, which records the six-week inauguration of the military camp at Châlons-sur-Marne. The 25,000-strong French Imperial Guard moved in

precise formation across the French countryside under the command of Napoleon III, and the exquisitely beautiful pictures were made as luxury souvenirs, presented in albums to the highest ranking officers.

By employing a nineteenth century aesthetic and creating a polished art work placed, in this instance, in the well-heeled confines of an art gallery on the edge of London's financial sector, An My Lê has created a particular frisson. Studiously dry and emptied of emotion, her piece

focuses our attention on the less familiar narrative of war as a logistical and administrative challenge.

Black-and-white photography may be over as a mainstream practice. Once familiar film stocks and paper types are disappearing from the marketplace. But monochrome will linger in the shadows as a specialist practice, brought out from time to time to provide the unexpected shock of the old and connecting us back once again to photography's unforgettable past. **RH**

Further information

Hans-Christian Schink has an exhibition at Galerie Rothamel Frankfurt until 18 October. Visit rothamel.de for further details, or see the photographer's own website at hc-schink.de.

An My Lê's *29 Palms* and her more recent series *Events Ashore* can be seen at the Barbican Art Gallery's autumn exhibition, *On the Subject of War*, which runs 17 October until 25 January. Visit barbican.org.uk for updates.

Roger Hargreaves is a writer and curator of photography, and is a research fellow at the Photography and the Archive Research Centre at the London College of Communication.