

# LEFT IN THE DARK

Elly Clarke

*Io and Zeus* (1530) by Correggio shows the seduction of the nymph Io after Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The figure of Io, head turned up as she meets the mouth of her seducer, along with her toe only just still on the ground, contrasts with the overbearing power of the cloud-like figure that comes upon her, arm pressing impossibly into her white flesh. The handling of paint, texture and form makes us sympathise, imagine and ultimately relate what we see in the image to our own experiences or fantasies. Two-dimensional depiction transforms into physical (three dimensional) sensory experience.

How do we translate? Where are the edges? What are our boundaries? Wittgenstein asked "Can I feel another's pain?" WJT Mitchell responds: "... the answer is yes and no: yes, I can feel something, a sympathy or empathy or (in the case of the sadistic voyeur) a kind of perverse delight; but no, I cannot feel it from inside, from the point of view of the sufferer."<sup>1</sup>

## DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Christian Sievers' background in sculpture is apparent through his unerring engagement with surface (and that which lies beneath it), form and boundaries. While the issues he is dealing with are huge—security, surveillance, intimacy, personal space, modes of perception—he starts with things that are immediately within his grasp. He borrows hi-visibility fabric from construction workers' clothing; downloads images from personal albums he finds on the Internet; takes photographs of car parks, back alleys and bus interiors. He shows us pictures of his wife when he talks about sensuality (though nobody but those close to him would know this). His palette

is made up from a set of materials that are already there.

His approach towards photography could be understood in a similar way. If he uses actors, he is interested in showing them as actors, or as people-as-actors, rather than the characters they are pretending to be. This forces us to acknowledge the limitations of representation.

*"There's nothing like a natural spontaneous pose. It makes everyone in the industry jealous."*<sup>2</sup>

Does the show need to go on? Who are we, with whom, in which context? How much can we tell about another person by looking at them? How long can we keep up the act?

*Anzug* (2008) is a tailor made executive suit, made out of retro-reflective material, which was originally developed to ensure the safety-through-visibility of the wearer. As a sculpture, *Anzug* hangs silently but chameleon-like in the gallery, changing its colours, hues and tones in reaction to the time of day and the presence of people around it. As a prop in photographs, it is blinding. The response of the material to camera flash plunges everything and everyone around it into darkness and all detail is lost.

The night-time scenes in which the suit appears are various, unconnected and random. In one scenario, we see a boy, half in or half out of his vest, in an unlit park, image snapped by an outsider with a flash—a few weeds silhouetted against the glare of his clothing. In another, the suit appears on a man posing within a family group photo. The high-tech/ahead of the game/safety conscious prodigal son is so bright that his family can no longer be seen. A third scene shows a man lying under the wheel of a car.

The true narratives of the scenes are left unexplained. Whether they belong to a film not yet made, or to one that already has been, we do not know. We are left with only our imagination to fill in the gaps.

## BROKEN NARRATIVES

Such gaps have a presence however. Through indicating the impossibility of a few photographs being able to tell a story by themselves, Christian Sievers forces a reconsideration of approach. Where some artists take images from newspapers and magazines and divorce them from their context to show how ineffective they are by themselves at relaying the stories they would otherwise be illustrating, Christian creates objects that physically resist photographic reproduction—because they are too bright, too reflective, or too detailed to be captured in a picture. Or because their day-glo colours do not even exist within Agfa or Fuji's palette.

*"The more you think you can see, the more you can document something on a photo, the less you actually grasp it."*<sup>3</sup>

Photography is, after all, a medium that requires and creates distance between the object and the viewer.

## PRESENTATION IS EVERYTHING

In the slide lecture *On Look But Don't Touch* (2005–6), we are shown a close-up photograph of a woman looking away. It is taken at night, outside, under the orange glow of London street lighting. She seems tired, looks bored. She is not posing. She is perhaps going somewhere—her image captured unawares. The lecturer says:

*"The real sensualness of it all is in the concealing, with the promise of the reveal—going from one state to the other, catching a flash in someone's eye, a glimpse of a gesture, a shadow at the small of the back."*

As an audience, we are not sure whether the words are the artist's, or the person he may have invited to perform the lecture in his place, or if they are someone else's altogether. But if they

are not of the person speaking, then whose words are they? Do they belong to the person whose image we're seeing on the slide? We're left in the dark again.

Christian Sievers' work can be understood in terms of that which is visible, or known, and that which is not. The gaps, like the dark of Chiaroscuro painting, allow the imagination to run free, while the elements that are there (in the light), drive and direct his practice along a very clear line of investigation. Like the ever-changing *Anzug*, his sculptures, photos, drawings, slide shows and montages grant room to the viewer to bring his or her own interpretation to it. Belief and disbelief, clarity and murkiness, agreement and disagreement all go hand in hand together.

*"Without light there would be no colour."*

*"The world looks better in the dark... there is hope and optimism in what you cannot see."*

*"You can see the stars, sounds are clearer, and everything is a bit more quiet"*

*"I wish it were bright, the day would just begin and I still had it ahead of me."*

- 1 Quoted in: WJT Mitchell, *Ethics, Aesthetics and Trauma Photographs*, from *The Life and Death of Images—Ethics and Aesthetics*, Eds. Diarmuid Costello/Dominic Willson, Tate, London 2008, p.237
- 2 From Christian Sievers: *Does The Show Need to Go On?*, Performance Slide Talk, 2006
- 3 All following quotes from *On Look But Don't Touch*, 2005–6