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SCENES ON THE DEATH  
OF NATURE

ANNE FERRAN

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Some weeks before the show itself could be fully realised Ross Gibson and I met and discussed the photographs. I include this dialogue between us by way of introducing (which is not to say prescribing) some of the issues that could be drawn out of the work as it appears in this exhibition context.



**Ross Gibson:** *Anne, there seem to be a few problems built into this series. Is it meant to be worrisome? For example, one is struck first of all by the spectacular scale; then one is intrigued and enticed by the classical compositions and the marbled, frieze-like textures of the configurations themselves; finally, the models are from a well-established order of seductiveness: young, female, non-confrontational players in a rite of passage out of innocence. To some extent there are many elements here of orthodox exploiter-pictures. Yet I also discern in the images, in the title and in the overall presentation of the show (in this gallery, at this time) a few well-laid clues that there is much more going on. How would you respond to my ambivalence?*

**Anne Ferran:** There's no doubt that the seductive and spectacular elements are there. The question is what they are doing there. This work follows on from an earlier series from 1984 called **Carnal Knowledge**. Part of that work was a text which was intended to open up certain ways of looking at the photographs and to exclude others. It had a secondary effect as well which was to help set up a consensus of critical response that the work was 'subversive' and 'disruptive' of conventional modes of representation. I've even said these things myself in a published statement on that work. Afterwards I began to feel that this kind of response (which I had in fact orchestrated) was an over-estimation of the capacity of the work. It was asking too much of it. So for the next project I decided to drop the text and to concern myself plainly with the visual, though not out of any disenchantment with writing or theory. The idea was **not to claim** any power of resistance for the images but to go the other way, to make them overtly passive and unresistant and to see what effects that would have. One of the problems to be dealt with in the current work is whether these pictures are literally passive and compliant or whether they are (instead/also) somehow **about** passivity and compliance. Whether they are exactly what they pretend to be or something else as well.

With **Carnal Knowledge**, apart from the appended text, the ambiguity of the title — the ‘problem’ of how to take that word ‘knowledge’ — served to prevent the image from becoming solely aestheticised, ethereal, or “feminine” in the Victorian sense of that word.

In this new series, you don’t have any texts to “protect” the work from “aberrant” readings. And although there is an equivocal title, the ethereal or “Victorian” sensibility is much more present than in **Carnal Knowledge**. There’s no denying some similarities with, say, the photos of Julia Margaret Cameron or with the neo-classical bas-relief compositions so prevalent in Victorian public art (The Albert Memorial is a monumental example). The **Scenes on the Death of Nature** are a lot less ‘ideologically correct’ than **Carnal Knowledge** in terms of the politics of representation, in terms of feminist doctrine, for example.

It ought to be acknowledged that the work does derive from theoretical concerns, particularly debates from the history of feminism. But I am not interested in trying to depict anything that could be said to be a truth about femininity. I am concerned with the **representation** of notions of femininity as they are arranged in systems such as religious iconography, mythology and classical aesthetics. This series is somewhat at odds with the traditional oppositional methods of a lot of feminist work. One doesn’t want to negate other feminist practices, certainly. And it is a worry that my work might be interpreted as opposing oppositional work. That is as merely conservative, which is what could happen if the ironies and ambiguities haven’t been worked out sufficiently.

*It might be more accurate to say that the **Scenes** are resistant or supplementary to oppositional works. Then you don’t get that simple idea of the negation of a negation. Certainly **Scenes** is not dogmatic work.*

It probably can’t be, because it is the ready-made critical or political position that’s relinquished. What happens then is that you begin to drift on to some other course that is uncharted and, because of that, quite risky. But the problem of starting with ‘a well-formulated critical position’ is that it’s always in front of you. You can only get what you already know about.

*You mentioned earlier how you were examining codes of representation. You referred to classical aesthetics. To what extent are you dealing with traditional aesthetics and classicism?*

I have tried to follow certain rules, which are aesthetic ones about constraint and composure. The governing principle of classicism might be one of containment. This is in direct contrast to the “disfiguring” excesses of romanticism or the baroque. To bring about strictly classical beauty it is absolutely necessary to re-enact all the “right” moves.

*These notions of containment, constraint, rightness are also implicit to standard representations of femininity, much as we were discussing them earlier. You take these notions on directly. You try them out. Practical research?*

Or it could be flirtation. There is an odd kind of impropriety for me in the involvement with classicism and notions of ideal beauty. And along with the involvement there is a loss of control; you can no longer be sure where all this is leading. So there is a decision to accept the rules, regulation and rationality of classicism, for a while. To participate in the game, in this case a game of visual signification. And the rules are quite specific. To take a couple of examples: firstly in order to signify abandonment on the faces and bodies of the models you have to apply all kinds of directorial constraints — there are rules for representing abandonment. Or secondly, the bas-relief format, by its association with funereal monuments connotes grief or mourning. But it has to be a staged grief, a conventional display of grief and not the depiction of a grief that has actually happened. (Besides, in classical terms, actual grief would be disfiguring and therefore artistically useless.)

*This might be a way of coming to terms with the nostalgic quality of the **Scenes**. In terms of content, of course, there is the funereal aspect. But in formal terms as well, the photos evince an attachment to things past. For example the stillness or stoniness of the tableaux would appear to be analogous to the statuesque qualities of much 19th century slow-exposure photo-portraiture. In some way the **Scenes** seem to be examining the problems of inheritance, the questions of how taste, desire, the judgement of what is beautiful all come from a historical complex which one has grown from. These judgements of taste etc. are anything but 'natural'.*

Well, as we just said in different terms, this sense of artifice is one of the basic notions behind the **Death of Nature** series. It's worth noting in this respect how one needs to be aware of the materials being used in the work. They **are** photographs even though they look rather statuesque. They **are** visual works even though they have some connection to discourses initially expressed in other media . . . in theatrical performance, or in the language of cultural theory, for example. Meanings are being created and meddled with. These photos have formal characteristics normally associated with other media. This fact is significant in itself, literally significant.

*But the photos aren't completely controlled. You as the photographer can't be fully in command of all the artifices. This links up with something else you were saying earlier, about 'flirting' with the aesthetic, the beautiful.*

*In this respect the photos seem to be about intuition . . . intuition as a faculty of the mind, not as some ineffable private sense. I'll try to be a little more specific. Superficially these pictures satisfy certain half-conscious criteria of quality and attractiveness. For the most part they **are** formally and tonally harmonious. They are aesthetically satisfying. The pertinent response, then, is to ask why, to ask what are the formal and performative qualities that cause these images to be so intuitively engaging.*

*Here's a quote from Bernard Williams' recent book, **Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy**. He's talking about intuitions: "These are spontaneous convictions, moderately reflective but not yet theorised." I would say your photos are theorised, but they seem to be theorised quite intuitively.*

Well, having a cast of models to 'direct' and a cumbersome large-format camera to manoeuvre means there has to be a fair bit of conscious scheming. But wherever possible I did try to avoid making decisions in advance. The approach is meant to be one that combines rationality and spontaneity. For example, to arrive at compositions that 'worked' and concurrently to think about why they worked. What 'looks good' and what 'looks bad'? What holds the compositions together? These are both rational and intuitive judgements.

*You could compare the **Scenes on the Death of Nature** with Bill Henson's recent **Untitled** series.*

They're different. The word 'histrionic' has been used to describe the effect of his photos and I think that's apt. It has something to do with their tonal qualities which impede investigation. Their impact stops on that dark mysterious surface. They're irrational, ineffable, beyond discussion. For my part I wanted my pictures not to be shadowy but to appear bathed in the clear light of rationality. I was resisting the temptation to get lost in mystery, especially because of the particular subject matter — feminine images. Ultimately I think the **Scenes** have very little to do with the imaginary. They are on the side of the law and the symbolic.

## List of Works

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1. **Scenes on the Death of Nature, I & II.**  
1986  
Two black and white photographs, framed.  
122cm x 162cm (I), and 122cm x 144cm (II)
2. **Scenes on the Death of Nature, III. (*The Fall*)**  
1986  
Black and white photograph, framed.  
117cm x 157cm
3. **Scenes on the Death of Nature, IV.**  
1986  
Black and white photograph, framed.  
154cm x 115cm
4. **Scenes on the Death of Nature, V.**  
1986  
Black and white photograph, framed.  
114cm x 173cm
5. **The Three Orders. (*Conception, Assumption, Perpetuation*)**  
1986  
Installation

## Acknowledgements

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