

source

**JOSEPHINE
PRYDE
In Case My Mind
is Changing**

The artist Josephine Pryde met the writer Michelle Henning, author of *Photography: The Unfettered Image* at the British Library to talk about her new work and the ideas that had influenced and informed her practice.

MH: When the editors said the theme of the issue was PR photography, my immediate reaction was, 'oh what's that?', and then my second reaction was, 'I don't know what it is because I think everything is it now'. I couldn't imagine a type of photography that wasn't.

JP: Say we were to be talking about theories regarding the financialisation of all areas of what we call 'life', then we could possibly see all photographs as PR. But if you always want to extract that as the core... I can't understand it as an entirely helpful reduction to say basically all photographs are PR and I think that's partly because of working with students. I'm not in the business of diagnosing how they use photography, exactly. It's a question of timing... trying not to pre-empt their work with a pre-set categorisation.

MH: I suppose one of the things I was thinking about is more that anything could become PR. It seems to me that images can circulate quite easily across from being in one space into a completely different space.

JP: Images can do that, and then the claims that you want to make about the images or the contexts become the interesting part, I suppose. Working while aware of the mutability of photography.

MH: I was thinking about your work and I want to

use the word 'idioms'. I don't know if that's because it was a word you used, or did you?

JP: No, I didn't, but anything to do with grammar I usually quite like.

MH: ...idioms from different spheres of practice coming together in odd ways or clashing or overlapping. I was struck by the tension between the kind of mobility that photography appears to have and then the fact that we can recognise generic or specific tropes and techniques. We can almost locate them in different kinds of practices but your work seems to refuse to let that happen or to play with that somehow.

JP: I think that's a good description of what I was trying to say about the mutability of photography before. I've noticed how often press releases for my work, to return briefly to public relations, have described it as 'resembling', or 'playing with', or 'exploring' fashion or advertising photography. I decided recently to try using the verb 'learn' instead. Learning from those applications of photography.

MH: On social media, we are putting forward a self or constructing a self – there is always this kind of double consciousness of observing, of just trying to be yourself but also performing yourself, performing a version of yourself.

JP: Yourself as a resource.

MH: You do this thing in a lot of your titles where you do something with the first person, the word 'I'.

JP: *These are just things I say, they are not my opinions.*

MH: Yes, and *lapses in Thinking By the person i Am. Or, In Case My Mind Is Changing...* as if you are not you.

JP: I think it's fair to say questions of authorship and subjectivity persist in bothering me.

So, for example, in the library today, I am re-reading Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author', and I'm also reading Foucault's 'What is an Author' for the first time – I am not a theoretician at all, or an academic, so it is slow, painstaking reading – because I have been trying to think about the paradoxes of individual recognition lurking within the challenge to authorship. Who the remaining individuals become.

These texts are both around 50 years old, though, and concerned with writing primarily. I am thinking obliquely about writing when I am taking photographs, too, I suppose. Or thinking in words as well as pictures.

For example, the series of photographs featuring hands that I made were inspired in part from my times on entrance examination commissions. I don't think it's betraying the privacy of candidates for the art school where I work if I say that, often, when the commission asks 'why do you want to study art?', the candidate responds with, 'I want to do it for me', and in some cases,



Für Mich from *These Are Just Things I Say, They Are Not My Opinions* (2014)
(Arnolfini, Bristol)

puts their hand on their chest to identify themselves as the 'me' in question. I became interested in examining my own pre-conceptions about this answer... it is often a prudent hedge in a stressful examination situation, too, of course. But I suppose I was curious why 'for me' would be an answer, and not something along the lines of 'I am curious to experiment in a field that compels me....' Or 'who cares?'

MH: There was an idea of critical art practice that I got from college, I had a sense that I was entering into a set of practices or an ongoing conversation in the art world and there was this pressure to intervene in some way, to act in that space but the idea of any form of self expression or self was suppressed.

JP: Yes, and I think that had good aspects and bad aspects. The difference for women students could be mentioned here, too... you feel the instruments of the history of art, or just the social world in which you are working as a woman, chiming dissonantly in each art school day you pass. So sometimes being able to say 'I' or 'me', and obviously Tracey Emin's work is a prime example of that, it did have its kind of role and its place. But to be able to adopt a non-self-identifying position as a woman artist and to be able to think critically or work critically was always, a challenge, yes.

MH: You do a lot of work that involves images that seem to be more familiar to perhaps women more than men, that draws on certain kinds of visual materials or tropes or techniques ... the changing rooms of shops, gossip magazines and fashion. I wondered whether you thought about this as a kind of feminine or young women's space?

JP: How to think of space and whose space it is? I am not sure about gendering borders, though. Another pamphlet that I have got out of the library here is a Christine Delphy pamphlet, called *The Main Enemy*, from 1977. I hadn't seen it before and it is great to find it here. She mentions in this text how there is no kind of acknowledgement, in the 1970s world where she is walking around, of any people having periods. Not even a sanitary disposal bin. Even if things may have changed somewhat since then, I remain interested in the histories and formations of these shifting visibilities.

When I was doing the research for the pieces that used the MRI scans of a pregnant woman, (*It's Not My Body*), I went to see a gynaecologist in Berlin who let me sit in on some consultations. I asked him somewhat bluntly afterwards whether, scientifically speaking, babies could be gestated in all sorts of different places. He wouldn't answer. I had presumed that human gestation might be possible in all kinds of different hosts and that as time goes on, exploring this might become more usual. So, I added desert-like landscapes to the MRI scans, to correspond with my imagination of that. But so far, I don't know any man who has had to do a pregnancy test. And the exhibition (*Embryos and Estate Agents*) became on one side of the room the MRI scans of the pregnant woman over the landscape, while the other side of the room had photographs of three teenage girls who agreed to model for me. They are variously holding a pregnancy test or, at my request, pulling a face that corresponded with how they might look if they had just learned they were pregnant. The two sets of photographs faced each other off. I suppose I am saying I see spaces as having



Conception III from *Embryos and Estate Agents: L'Art de Vivre* (2011)
(Chisenhale Gallery, London)



been traversed by histories of gender, rather than that I am looking for empirically gendered locales.

I've also looked at Helen Chadwick's work again in the library here. She did some pieces called *Viral Landscapes* in the late eighties...

MH: Yes! I remember that.

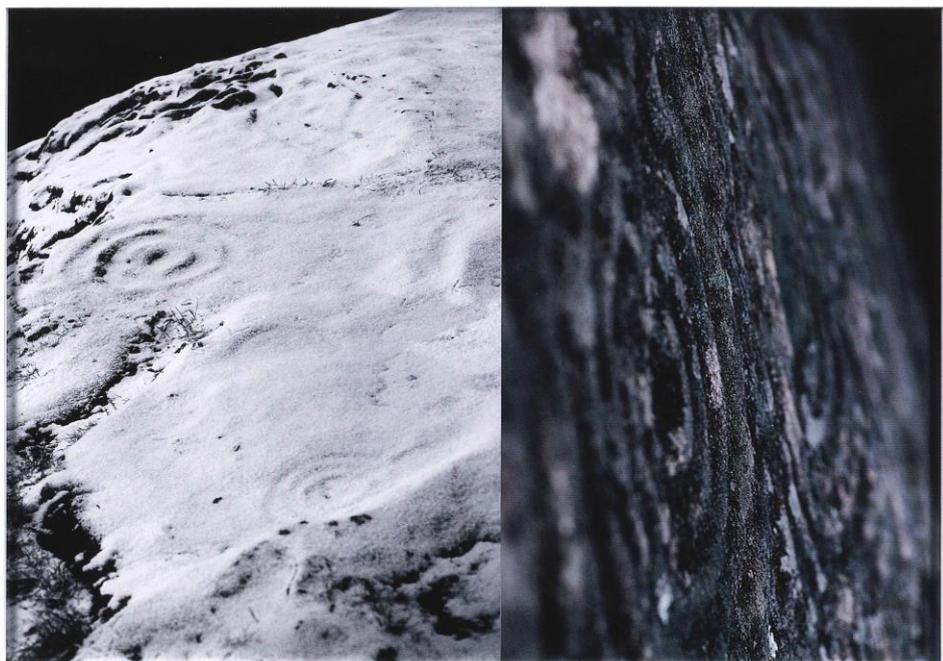
JP: ...and she may also have been the only woman who had come in as a visiting lecturer when I was at Central St. Martins. She was always very lively and interesting to talk to. I found an interview here where she talked about how she did the viral landscapes. She was basically describing what was later Photoshop, a programme where she could overlay things and the cut of the surrealist or collage technique was not visible anymore. The absence of the cut interested her.

MH: Could we talk about your recent show? You were dealing with Neolithic stones...

JP: Yes. It was another show with two main elements. I have known for a while that I wanted to use images of these carvings at some point. Starting with what are known as 'cup and ring' markings. They appear on rocks in different parts of Europe, and I think possibly, further afield. Broadly speaking, parts of Europe where Celts



Conception XI from *Embryos and Estate Agents: L'Art de Vivre* (2011)
(Chisenhale Gallery, London)



lived. Very broadly. I am just starting to find out what I can about them.

MH: How did you come across them or what made you interested?

JP: I am interested in the appearance of these markings. Both what they look like and whence they came. The radiating rings also reminded me of the symbol used to show the presence of a wifi signal. In the exhibition, I combined two photographs in one frame. There were photographs of cup and ring markings I took in Northumberland and in Galicia in the show. I didn't say which were which. These carvings were made probably between one thousand five hundred and four thousand years ago. It's very hard to date them because you can't date rocks very easily. It depends on what's found near them – burial objects have been found near some of them and they can be tested. But it was quite extraordinary to see in Spain the same markings that I was familiar with from Northumberland. Far apart from each other. A short flight and a bit of driving now, perhaps, but what else separates them? How did that happen, the repeats of these patterns in places far apart geographically? Was it migration of thought, migration of people? Clearly the fact that it happened in two different places like this speaks of migration. There is a migration at this point, there is a kind of language appearing between places.

MH: A lot of your shows have something three dimensional.

JP: I like sometimes not just having photos on the wall. And I had never done anything like the 3D prints that were in the show, on the floor. I didn't want them on plinths like sculptures, and the space that they described, or were asked to represent, was a space that I had visualised in my head – I think I tried to say this in the press release but I wrote it in not a very explanatory way. I had picked up a tampon to use it, and in the moment I was holding it, between my finger and thumb, an image had come into my head of the time when I had bought it, in Boots on Chancery Lane. I saw again in my mind's eye the space where I was when I was bending down and choosing between one brand and another.

I had thought that to 3D print this 'space', as it were, would be a way to render it without the expression of my hands on a material. I needed other hands and brains more skilled in 3D design than I, though, to realise the files for printing.

One thing I hadn't realised was that cameras are so-to-speak built into 3D software, that's how you see what you are working on in 3D, there are cameras that you move around the object with. That I found interesting in the relationship to photography...

MH: Hypothetical cameras...

JP: Well, the way you move around the shape you are building, to look at it, while you and your body are still stuck sitting in front of the screen, is not a simulation of walking round it, nor even of flying, it's a mechanical sort





Cup and Ring 3 from In Case My Mind is Changing (2018)
(Simon Lee Gallery, London)

of disembodied eye. The very simple software a colleague at the art school kindly set me off on uses the word 'camera' in the dropdown menu. I mean, this is probably laughably simplistic of me, but I think of the 3D prints as lens-based in a way, because of the role of the camera in their constitution. A camera freed from a body/operator.

Another thing I hadn't wanted to do was try and interpret carvings any more than I would interpret the 3D prints. There was a review in *Art Monthly* by Isobel Harbison...

MH: Oh, I read that, she reads them as fertility symbols?

JP: She brought that reading up, rather than deciding it herself, I think, and looked at the work of a French pre-historian whose writing I had not come across so far but which I will look out for. The power of the various juxtapositions in the show – not an overlaying here – should lie in the associations they provoke, I think... So the 3D prints, with their tampon-related recall, can simultaneously allow and disallow the cup and ring carvings from being firmly assigned to a female fertility reading. And vice versa.

MH: In your press release you wrote about memory and Photoshop?

JP: Yes. I did an adult education course in Photoshop at City Lit last summer, and the teacher – I am very grateful to him, Stelios – the first thing he said, was that Photoshop works with memory.

MH: And not with outlines / vectors.

JP: Exactly, not like Illustrator. And he didn't mention visuals first, but memory. Then it is not just about what you are seeing, it's what is contained in the memory somehow, the idea that these units, these digital units are recalling something rather than depicting it. I wanted to put that idea together with these stones. These carvings often appear on rocky outcrops on hillsides, rock faces which in current landscapes resemble screens installed into the earth. That gives me something I want to think about further, as I take this work on.