

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

13 April – 19 June 2016

(Preview Tuesday 12 April, 6.30 – 9 pm)



Left: David Claerbout, *KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)*, 2015–16. Single-channel video projection, HD animation, black-and-white, silent, 10-minute loop. Courtesy of the artist and galleries, Sean Kelly, New York, and Micheline Sz wajcer, Brussels. **Right:** Stephen Shore, *U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973*, 1973 (printed 2002). C-print. Edition of 8. 43.2 x 55.2 cm (17 x 21¾ in). Framed 59 x 68 cm (23¼ x 26¾ in). Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York.

Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art is delighted to present *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography*, an exhibition that explores the uncanny as exemplified in the works of seven artists from two generations, all of whose work includes in different forms the use of photography as a medium. They are: **Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore** and **Joel Sternfeld**.

As early as 1835, the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling wrote of "das Unheimliche," the uncanny, as 'everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible'. Years later, Sigmund Freud elaborated on what Schelling and others had thought about this 'peculiar quality', but he also 'felt impelled' to investigate it in relation to aesthetics. In his influential essay 'The "Uncanny"', 1919, Freud saw there was a common thread to everything that arouses our sense of the uncanny: it 'is that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar'. Although individual responses are complex and subjective, what we experience as uncanny is that which gives us a feeling of unease when something seems both familiar and unfamiliar, when some quality effaces the distinction between the imagined and the real.

The *Magical Surfaces* title of this exhibition derives from the thoughts of Vilém Flusser who, in his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 1983, wrote of photographic images as 'significant surfaces' and of 'the magical nature of images'. We are always intrigued when an apparently straightforward image suddenly takes on an ambiguous, *uncanny*, quality as our mind grasps, as Ernst Jentsch wrote in 1906, its 'intellectual uncertainty'.

The mastery each of the exhibiting artists has over their own process of manipulating the photographic image invites us to marvel at the many ways the uncanny can occur in photographic works. Essentially exploring time in his work, **David Claerbout** does indeed appear to do magic by bringing a pre-stardom Elvis Presley intimately back to life in three-dimensions by digitally reconstructing him from a 1950s black-and-white photograph. **Julie Monaco's** often hyper-real and dramatically turbulent scenes appear at first to be images of nature, but in fact are created entirely on her computer using fractal algorithmic software. An absence of presence is discernible in the apparently realistic images created by **Jörg Sasse**, one of the first artists to use computer technology as his brush and canvas. Both he and **Elger Esser** studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Prof. Bernd Becher, who together with his wife Hilla is renowned for their remarkable photographs of industrial buildings. Esser, too, deals with time and memory in his serenely lit and composed land- and seascapes that seem at once to be both familiar and unfamiliar.

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Sonja Braas works entirely in analogue, sometimes from ready-made sources, often by artificially creating landscapes or by building models which she then photographs, rather than directly photographing actual nature. Among other things, her work questions what is real and what is unreal in any image. In the 1970s, both **Stephen Shore** and **Joel Sternfeld** travelled independently across the USA, taking what are evocatively revealing photographs of the time and place. Using Kodachrome film and 35-mm cameras, they managed to capture an atmosphere that is almost palpably uncanny. Their work continues to inspire subsequent generations of artists to continue innovating with photography. As Sternfeld says: 'Photography has always been capable of manipulation. [...] any time you put a frame to the world, it's an intervention [...] photographs have always been authored.'

This exhibition is curated by **Ziba Ardalan**, Founder/Director of Parasol unit. It is accompanied by a comprehensive publication which includes essays by **Ziba Ardalan**, **David Claerbout**, and **Marta Dahó** who is an independent curator and teacher of History of Photography, based in Barcelona.

Note to Editors

Artist Biographies

Sonja Braas, born 1968 in Siegen, Germany, now lives and works in New York, USA. She studied Visual Communication, Photography and Film Design at Fachhochschule (University of Applied Arts and Sciences) in Dortmund and the School of Visual Arts in New York, where she has lived since 1997. Braas has works in the collections of, among others, the Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY, and Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA, USA; The Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland; and in the DZ Bank Art Collection, Germany.

David Claerbout, born 1969 in Kortrijk, Belgium, now lives and works in both Antwerp, Belgium, and Berlin, Germany. From 1992–1995, he studied at the Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp. During 2002–03, he participated in the DAAD: Berlin Artists-in-Residence program. Claerbout has work in major public collections worldwide, including among others: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA.

Elger Esser, born 1967 in Stuttgart, Germany, spent his childhood in Rome. He now lives and works in Düsseldorf. From 1991–1997, he studied in Germany at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Academy of Art) under renowned photographer Bernd Becher. His land- and seascapes have been shown in many international venues, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA; the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Netherlands; Kunsthaus Zürich, Switzerland; Centre Pompidou Paris, France; Lenbachhaus Munich, Germany; and Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Germany. In 2016 he was awarded the Oskar-Schlemmer-Preis.

Julie Monaco was born 1973 in Vienna, Austria, where she now lives and works. She attended the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, during the 1990s before moving to Los Angeles, CA, USA, to study 3-D animation at Raleigh Studios. Her recent solo exhibitions include *Focused Daily*, *Hyperrealistic Landscapes*, at DAM Gallery, Berlin, and Klaus Engelhorn 20, Vienna; and *Chemical Plates* which travelled from Factory der Kunsthalle Krems to Galerie Traklhaus Salzburg, Austria, and finally to Galerie Ernst Hilger, Vienna, Austria.

Jörg Sasse was born 1962 in Bad Salzufflen, Germany. From 1982–1988, he studied photography under renowned photographer Bernd Becher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Academy of Art). In 2007, a major retrospective of his work was shown at the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, Germany. His group shows include Markthalle für Moderne Kunst in Stuttgart, Germany; Het Nederlands Fotomuseum in Sittard, Netherlands; ICA|Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain; and Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

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Stephen Shore, born 1947 in New York City, currently lives in Tivoli, New York. He has successfully exhibited internationally in major museum shows, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Germany; PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; International Centre of Photography, New York, and the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO, USA. His group exhibitions have included the Barbican Gallery, London, UK; National Gallery, Washington, DC; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA; and Whitney Museum, New York, USA; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and Tate Modern, London, UK; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA.

Joel Sternfeld was born 1944 in New York City, where he still lives and works. He has been the subject of important exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA, USA. His awards include two Guggenheim fellowships and the Prix de Rome. He had his first UK solo exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery in 2003.

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VISITOR INFORMATION

Founded in December 2004, Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art is a registered educational charity and a not-for-profit institution that operates purely for the public benefit. Every year the foundation organises four challenging and thought-provoking exhibitions of works by international contemporary artists working in various media, arranges other artistic projects and most years grants an Exposure Award, which offers graduating students from a selected London art school the opportunity to exhibit their work professionally. The foundation also engages with the public and its neighbouring community through a full programme of educational events. In its genuine mission to serve the public, the foundation does not bear the name of its founder, and its exhibitions do not derive from any particular private collection. Admission to all exhibitions at Parasol unit is free of charge. Thanks to its innovative model between private funding and public support, one of London's most vibrant contemporary art spaces has come to exist and thrive.

Free Admission
Parasol unit
14 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW

Opening hours:
Monday by prior arrangement
Tuesday–Saturday, 10 am – 6 pm
Sunday, 12 – 5 pm

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