

## Screen Memories

GHOST CAMERA, directed by Bernard Vorhaus, is an old English movie which has a really bizarre story to do with photography. Someone finds a camera and develops its film in order to find the owner, but the pictures instead provide clues to a crime. One of the negatives shows a murder, one man stabbing another. (The theme of Antonioni's BLOW UP is not that far away at this point.) This negative mysteriously goes missing, together with the camera. But Vorhaus's amateur sleuth still has the other four negatives from the camera and on printing them up he finds sufficient clues in the pictures to track down the scene of the crime. It's by finding out where the photos were taken, revisiting their locations, that he is led to the spot where the fifth photo was taken and the discovery of the body of the murder victim. A series of otherwise banal and nondescript pictures – a woman in a doorway, a train, an inn, and ruins in a landscape – become important for the clues they offer. The address of a street in London, discernible in the first photo, enables him to track down the woman in the picture, the number of the train leads him to determine the route of the railway line which leads him to find the inn in the next picture and then the ruins and, finally, the murder scene.

Film offers a fitting way to begin to consider the work of the Californian artist Cindy Bernard. For four to five years she was working on a project in which she made a series of photographs which stem from popular American movies. For this project, like Vorhaus's amateur detective, she visited places already pictured. She followed in someone else's footsteps. Only she sought out the locations where films had been shot and took a photograph on that exact same site. And on occasion this even meant she located and photographed scenes of a crime, crimes, that is, which took place in films.

Between 1989 and 1992, she made a series of 21 photographs of film locations, collectively entitled ASK THE DUST. Each photograph she took involved careful research: time spent going over production records at the Margaret Herrick

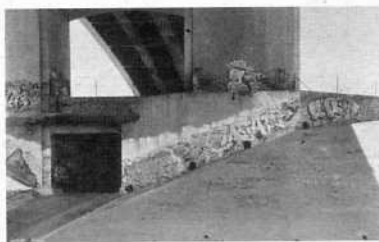
Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills, letters and phone calls to directors and production managers. Together these pictures from 'the pictures' span 20 years, 1954 to 1974, beginning with a location shot tracked down from the sci-fi film THEM and ending with a view from Roman Polanski's CHINATOWN. Each photograph is given the title of the film their location stems from, and two dates, the time of the film and the time Bernard took her picture. There's a desire to match her pictures to the films as closely as possible. The elongated format of each photo exactly duplicates the aspect ratio of the original film. And, in accordance with the movies they are taken from, three of the locations are photographed in black-and-white.

These pictures come out of detective work on the part of the artist in tracking down the exact sites used in the films. They also invite us to do our own detective work. As a result, Bernard's photos call for a particular forensic inspection. Treating the photographs as literal, evidential records, we scour them for clues, noting such details as the danger sign on the side of a weir in SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS (1961/1990), the graffiti on the underpass in THEM (1954/1991), the name 'Holiday Inn' which is just legible on the bottom of the rooftop pool in the aerial view in DIRTY HARRY (1971/1990).



Ask the Dust: Cheyenne Autumn (1964/1990)  
1990  
Colour photograph  
10-3/8 x 23 inches  
11 of 21 parts

opposite:  
Study for Cheyenne Autumn  
1989  
Pencil, colour photograph on paper  
11 x 8-1/2 inches



Ask the Dust: Them (1954/1991)  
1991  
Black and white photograph  
14-1/2 x 23 inches  
1 of 21 parts

Ask the Dust: Vertigo (1958/1990)  
1990  
Colour photograph  
12-1/2 x 23 inches  
5 of 21 parts

Ask the Dust: Splendor in the Grass (1961/1990)  
1990  
Colour photograph  
12-1/2 x 23 inches  
8 of 21 parts

Ask the Dust: Chinatown (1974/1990)  
1990  
Colour photograph  
11-1/2 x 23 inches  
21 of 21 parts

We view Bernard's pictures knowing they are taken from films. These are pictures of empty and emptied out sites which invite us to fill them up with our own imagined scenarios and/or filmic memories. We bring narratives to these half-familiar scenes. Bernard's view of the Golden Gate Bridge is familiar as Hitchcock's view in *VERTIGO*, and as the place where James Stewart, 'Scottie', rescues Kim Novak, 'Madeleine', from the waters. Our relation to Bernard's panoramic rooftop view over streets in San Francisco alters irrevocably once we know it (and remember it) as the same location from which a killer shoots a girl swimming in a rooftop pool in the opening sequence of the film *DIRTY HARRY*.

Bernard gives us counter or rather anti-narratives: nothing happens in her haunted and silent views. Some of the depopulated sites in Bernard's pictures – for example, the filling station in *FIVE EASY PIECES* (1970/1991), the bank on the corner of a road in *BONNIE AND CLYDE* (1967/1991) – possess a quality reminiscent of Eugene Atget's views of empty streets. And what Walter Benjamin said of them might just as well be said of such pictures by Bernard: "deserted like the scene of a crime."

Some locations recur: the landscape of Monument Valley, familiar to us because of Westerns. Bernard shows us the cinematic aspects of such a landscape, framing Ford Country exactly as John Ford framed it for *THE SEARCHERS* and *CHEYENNE AUTUMN*. Such landscape views are symbolic of a particular vision of America: permanent features of the American landscape like 'The Mittens' in Monument Valley come to stand for conservative values, banks in Los Angeles like to use them in their advertising, as Bernard pointed out to me.

*ASK THE DUST*'s film chronology from 1954 to 1974, makes us think of history, the narration of turbulent political events from McCarthyism through to Nixon's resignation. One thinks of the films referenced by Bernard as representing the times in which they were made. Violence runs through many of them. We begin with a film about invasion, *THEM*, and end with a film about political corruption, *CHINATOWN*. The images from both, are dystopian, a foil to the beauty of the landscapes of all the Westerns: *THEM* (1954/1991) shows an underpass covered with graffiti – the lair of the giant ants – and *CHINATOWN* (1974/1990) a wasteland on the fringes of LA. With its story about an invasion of giant ants, the film *THEM* might not only be interpreted as reflecting a fear of Communist invasion but a wider fear of the other. *CHINATOWN* is a film about control

over the land; the violence and corruption in the film stemming from crooked political figures starving land of water so that they can buy it up cheaply. It's the location of the dried up river bed the private detective (Jack Nicholson) visits in the film which is tracked down and pictured by Bernard.

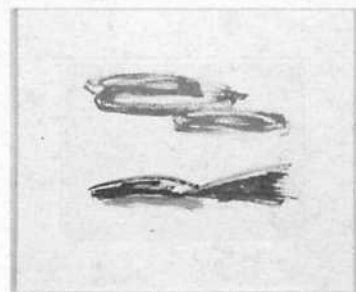
Bernard's strategy of taking photographs of places which stem from watching films appears to relate to the postmodern photographic practice of an earlier generation of American artists such as Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. By appropriating or mimicking other pictures such artists seemed to set out to expose the second-hand quality of our perceptions, demonstrating how our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Prince's photos of details of Marlboro Men ads, Levine's copies of pictures of Walker Evans and Edward Weston, Sherman's impersonations of women in film, have become emblematic of a postmodern climate in which firsthand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial.

Bernard's *ASK THE DUST* series begins with representation but returns us to the 'real' of specific locations. Films trigger a quest for and a return to an origin on the part of the photographer. But the point seems to be that the real site is unattainable. When viewed by the spectator, Bernard's pictures are seen 'through' the filter of filmic memories and associations.

However, this return to specific locations still gives the work a distinctive effect. It does not sit all that easily within a postmodern frame. In this respect it's interesting to view her photos in relation to the rephotography of William Christenberry. He spent time tracking down and photographing views previously photographed by Walker Evans. Christenberry retraced the journeys of his predecessor, taking photographs to match as closely as possible views taken by Evans. The present is viewed and framed according to pictures from the past. 24 years after Evans, and in colour, Christenberry photographed the same warehouse and grocery storefronts in Stewart, Alabama. His rephotography allows us to measure the changes in places over time. The note is elegiac: the storefronts in his photo after Evans are now abandoned. At the same time Christenberry is recording the places where he spent his childhood, he's revisiting places strongly tied up with personal memory. And this is brought out in part by the way in which he would take his pictures with a simple Brownie camera, giving them the feel and intimacy of family photos.

Family photographs are important to Bernard. In 'Grandfather Photographs', 1989, she made an archaeology of her own family photographs. Bernard selected and printed 20 colour pictures from the 3500 slides her granddad took in documenting family vacations between 1950 and 1979. These were mostly taken in the North American continent, though later travels record Alaska, Hawaii and Haiti.

Though spanning a similar time to *ASK THE DUST*, it's private memories rather than public cinematic memories which circulate round these pictures. What recurs in these pictures is the open road, the power of the perspectival view, the rush of roads into the distance. We also find this in some of the pictures from the *ASK THE DUST* series, most notably and dramatically in Bernard's *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* (1959/1990) in which the road disappears into the vanishing point of the blue horizon, a deep spatial recession which evokes temporality: an open expanse of road to be travelled, making you think of journeys and adventures still to come. Bernard is interested in the road as metaphor: "it symbolizes



David Padilla Cabrera  
*Summer Storm #5*  
1991  
Gouache on paper  
9 x 12 inches  
series of 15

freedom and confinement. Stretching beyond the horizon, it promises infinity yet it is part of a grid defining space." She has said how each of her grandfather's images "reflects a desire to transcend those boundaries, to discover that point of infinite space." Silent and bereft of narratives the viewer is left to project their own imaginings and narratives onto these photos of the open road.



Albert Oehlen: *Untitled (Streets)*  
1988  
Oil on canvas  
108-3/16 x 147-9/16 inches  
(488)



Stephen Prina: *Wars of the Roses*,  
1455-1485, 1987 — to Delacroix —  
1 of 2: *Rosa Gallica*, "Officinalis",  
"Red Rose of Lancaster", before 1600  
The Shakespeare Garden, The Huntington  
Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California  
Cibachrome print, 22-1/2 x 22-1/2 inches



Stephen Prina: *Wars of the Roses*,  
1455-1485, 1987 — to Delacroix —  
2 of 2: *Rosa X Alba*,  
"White Rose of York", before Christ  
The Shakespeare Garden, The Huntington  
Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California  
Cibachrome print, 35 x 35 inches

Installation views: "Nothing Sacred"  
Organised by Cindy Bernard and  
Brad Dunning  
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles,  
1987



Cindy Bernard: *Two Roads*  
1991  
Two colour photographs mounted on wood panels  
46 x 85 x 3 inches each  
Installation view: "Not Painting: Some Views from  
the Permanent Collection", Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1994

While *ASK THE DUST* was still underway, Bernard made two *ROADS*, 1991, which consists of two large-scale colour photographs of hair-pin bends, both taken in Monte Carlo. Unlike those receding roads pictured in the *ASK THE DUST* series and *GRANDFATHER PHOTOGRAPHS*, these hair-pin bends effect a kind of reverse perspective, roads which don't rush away but come towards us. A Hollywood star is the key to the significance of these sites: Grace Kelly. One road is the place where she pulls off the road and kisses Cary Grant in Hitchcock's film *TO CATCH A THIEF*, the other, an accident black spot: the place where the actress died in a car crash.

With *TWO ROADS* Bernard's photographs were placed across from each other in a narrow space and hung low on the wall. They possessed a physical presence. This strategy of display is further explored in two recent photographs, *THE EYE* and *THE FANG*, 1995, which pictured

two rock climbing routes, each named by climbers according to their formal likenesses. Tacked directly to the wall, one vertical the other horizontal, these narrow but long prints of rock formations, approximately 12 feet in length, physically occupy their site of display. Such pictures set up a corporeal relationship to the viewer, grounding perception in the body.

Throughout the project of *ASK THE DUST*, Bernard continued to make abstract representations, a series of flat pictures resulting from black-and-white photos of photocopied blow-ups of the patterns found inside security envelopes. (Such work has its origins in an earlier series of photos of the abstract patterns found on fabric.) The patterns on the

envelopes served a function: they were there to prevent the confidential data in the letters being seen if they were held up to the light. Bernard gives us a mass of photos, 100 of



them, in *SECURITY ENVELOPE GRID*, 1987-93\*. Each print is carefully matted and framed. Photography pursues a dialogue with abstract painting, bureaucratic camouflage providing the means to make intriguing abstractions and a witty way of contravening modernist notions of photography's identity: these photos are neither mirrors nor windows.

This dialogue with abstraction is continued in her latest work: a series of computer-generated pictures, *TOPOGRAPHIES*, 1994-1995, based on images triggered by particular patterns on stones. This work also relates to Bernard's fascination with the anthropomorphic aspect of rock formations which was explored in *THE EYE* and *THE FANG*.

The computer images stem from rock collecting, and each picture of *THE TOPOGRAPHY* series is titled according to the name given to the rock the images stem from: *HICKORYITE #1*, *OREGON MOSS AGATE #3* (*DETAIL 1*), *DRY HEAD AGATE #2* (*DETAIL 1*). Seeing something in each stone – a face, a mushroom, a person in a landscape – these pictures are then developed into a three dimensional image through computer generation. Despite the high technology, the basis for what Bernard is doing here goes back to Leonardo da Vinci with his well known remarks that we can see pictures in stained walls and different kinds of stones.

Once the things suggested by the stones are formed on the computer screen, Bernard then selects and prints up only a part, a detail, of the image in the final work. What we are left with are a series of other-worldly geological sites, virtual worlds glistening in artificial light. The half-formed scenes of these abject topographies trigger our own fantasies. The synthetic worlds Bernard conjures up through the computer are unstable and indeterminate. The forms are rather amorphous and mutable. If not strange landscapes, they evoke the human body, both outward body parts and its visceral interior. In



Stephen Prina:  
*War of the Roses*, 1455-1485  
1987  
(Detail)



Cindy Bernard: *Two Roads*  
1991  
(detail)



Cindy Bernard: *Two Roads*  
1991  
(detail)

many ways these extraordinary pictures point to a characteristic underlying all of Cindy Bernard's work: openness. Her photographs and computer-generated images refuse closure and fixity, one reading will not do.

*Mark Durden, May 1995*

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Note\*: Please see page 40