

Anneè Olofsson

Site Gallery

5 July – 23 August 2003



Anneè Olofsson

A woman stands with her back to the viewer, another lies on a bed; a boy watches television, and a man reads a book on a couch. They have all turned their backs on us. To turn your back on someone is a gesture that has a number of meanings – from giving them the cold shoulder, to keeping emotions under wraps, away from prying yet loving eyes. In Anneè Olofsson's first solo show in the UK, the backs of her protagonists are full of meaning, where the body sends a message without uttering a word, or looking the audience in the eye. Whether their backs appear in a domestic setting or in the photographic studio, the scenarios in which they appear strike a chord of recognition in the viewer: the relationship between father and daughter, a narrative suggested by a woman curled up alone on a bed or a man's monosyllabic replies to a woman's searching questions. However, in Olofsson's work, this familiarity is not comforting: it is shot through with ambiguity.

The family unit is often at the heart of this compelling body of work that, in Olofsson's hands, is always transformed into something uncanny. *Skinned* (2002) is

a prime example of this, where in a deceptively simple series of photographs, a blonde woman appears alone until closer inspection reveals the hands of another underneath her skin-tight top. Whether these hands grip her by the waist, or shoulders, *Skinned* is an unsettling work in which the notion of having someone under your skin, now made visual, becomes riddled with ambivalence. This ambivalence is heightened further when we discover the blonde is the artist herself and the hands belong to Christer Olofsson – her father. These are sensual, edgy photographs that are knowingly haunted by the cultural taboos that surround father-daughter relationships, while at the same time attempt to give visual expression to a highly complex, influential relationship. Even without this autobiographical knowledge, this visualisation of a woman possessed is disturbing enough, and open to other critical interpretations. Ana Finel Honigman, for example, reads the artist's back in terms of the 'male gaze,' and an erasure of a woman's identity.¹ With these words in mind, it is therefore important to consider *Skinned* alongside *A Girl's Best Friend* (2003) that evokes a very different kind of embrace. Consequently whenever the family unit

appears in Olofsson's work, it is at once very particular (her own family members participate in several works on show here), yet the relationships are utilised in such a subtly transgressive way that Olofsson's narratives resonate beyond their literal connections to the artist.

A startling example of this is Olofsson's exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, in the video – with its stream-of-consciousness title – *You need her and you want her golden hair she sees you but she won't love you because she really doesn't care* (2000). In this work, the artist's mother, Lola, sits on a bed, reading out loud love letters sent to the artist by past lovers. Olofsson is lying in the bed, her bare back turned away from both her mother and the viewer. The power of this work is once again in its deceptive simplicity, where the words created by one kind of intimate relationship are put into the mouths of an entirely different other. '...You just exist in all corners of me...I love you...' reads Lola from one letter; from another 'your ponytail lay on the pillow. What hair! I kissed it again and again...' In this re-enactment of a familiar scene – a mother reading her child bedtime stories – the

conventional boundaries between mother/daughter are broken down. This is not simply by giving a mother insight into her adult daughter's sexual and romantic life, or the knowledge of how her daughter is seen through the eyes of a lover. The power of this work comes from the unexpected slippages that occur between the loves expressed in the letters to that of the mother's love for a daughter – the transference of sexual love to a maternal one. Olofsson's back remains poignantly turned away. Once again the artist creates a compelling narrative, in which the 'you' and 'she' of the title are not as clear-cut as they seem.

The practice of an artist using herself, from the body as a convenient tool to drawing explicitly from autobiographical material, has a long (and significantly gendered) tradition within the visual arts. Anne Olofsson's work is particularly timely, coinciding with a major showing of the work of Cindy Sherman, and following fellow Scandinavian artist Salla Tykkä's acclaimed autobiographical film projections, *Cave*, in Glasgow. In this artistic strategy, where the conventional positions between artist/model, subject/

object photographer/photographed, become blurred, it is not surprising that audiences often look to the artist's autobiography in order to understand an enigmatic artwork. For example, what does the viewer make of *God Bless the Absentees* (2000) where all the figures, regardless of gender or age are uncannily dressed, matching the rugs, blankets and upholstery they are either lying, standing or sitting on? The woman in the bathroom seems to be rendered immobile by absurdly long sleeves, while the boy transfixed by the TV screen becomes subsumed into the carpet itself. Ironically the visual doubling that occurs heightens the 'something missing' aspect of these scenarios. As the title of this series suggests (and Olofsson's titles are as important to the artist as her images) these works reveal how an 'absence' makes its presence felt in an individual's interior life – whether this is invoked by a book, or the re-occurring horse motif on a bed and corresponding pyjamas. Although gender differences are implied here – through the way female protagonists appear in suspended states, compared to the male protagonists who appear engrossed in their activities, the absence of 'what' – and 'who' – remains

open to interpretation. Olofsson makes visual the phrase 'the ties that bind' in which the themes of emotional distance, alienation and disconnection are inescapable part of human relationships.

In the photographs and videos of Anneè Olofsson, the autobiographical is compellingly absorbed into a practice where the process of staging scenarios with an element of theatricality is fundamental. This brings to mind Jeff Wall, who once described the importance of staging as a way of getting closer to 'situations which usually happen in the absence of the photographer...it is about making things visible rather than seeing what is already visible.'² These words seem equally resonant to Olofsson's narratives of relationships, which make visible those intangible moments where things remain unspoken, but hang in the air. In the video *Trick or Treat* (2002), the silences between the artist and her father are as equally telling as the kinds of questions and answers they make to one and other. 'What was your childhood like?' he asks her, to which she replies 'Both, I think I had a good childhood, but there may be things I don't remember.' The ambivalence of this reply,

and silence that follows, is heightened by the fact they are both wearing masks. These are only occasionally glimpsed as the camera is positioned as the back passenger in the car they are in. Olofsson's work seems compelled towards pushing at the boundaries of relationships that perhaps we take most for granted, and particularly that in the quest for the 'unknowable' that exists even in the most intimate and closest of relationships. As Sue Scott has so astutely pointed out, 'Olofsson is more attracted to the small fears that float in and out of our subconscious rather than shocking us with images of horror.'³ The notion of making visible small, even unconscious fears staged in a familial setting is one thing that unsettles the viewer. The ghost of Freud hovers over these works, along with some unexpected others. These may be particular to the British viewer, perhaps more familiar with the emotional drama of *Eastenders*, or the candidness of Richard Billingham's *Ray's A Laugh*. The scenarios staged in Olofsson's video and photographs raise provoking questions about the nature of 'family drama' we have become used to seeing on our screens, as well as throwing another light on the autobiographical and 'confessional' in recent British

contemporary art practice, perhaps most typified by the work of Tracey Emin. Emin's practice, the snapshot aesthetics of *Ray's A Laugh* and the formal aesthetics of Olofsson's work may seem worlds apart, but these examples are useful to help identify the significance of staging in Olofsson's work where the distinction between the 'real' self and the one that appears in the artwork are much more ambiguous.

This is particularly important when we are confronted by the photograph *Ai* (2002), which features the artist, lying contorted on the floor, her face turned away and covered by wet hair. In fact Olofsson, dressed in skin-tight black clothing from head to foot, is drenched. Her body is twisted as much as possible in both directions, and makes for disconcerting viewing – and it is no surprise when the artist reveals that 'Ai' in Swedish is an expression for pain. However what is surprising, and further emphasises the complexity of Olofsson's body of work on show here, is that this image is based on the Italian sculpture of St Cecilia – a white marble sculpture from the seventeenth century. Olofsson was drawn to this sculpture, particularly

to the strange twist of her head. The artist was also drawn to the story of St Cecilia, who was decapitated – a martyr's death. It is not at all essential for the viewer to recognize this reference as the inspiration for *Ai* – for although Olofsson may have appropriated the sculpture of St Cecilia, the artist has not re-enacted it for its art historical significance but for its personification of a woman's pain. This does pose a provocative question on how – and why – images of historical, religious martyrdom (and the implication of female 'masochism') reverberate today. When contemplating *Ai* alongside the other works on show here, there is a sense that the world of martyrs and saints are subsumed by our more secular world, to make visible the everyday, commonplace experiences of pain – whether this is through sex, class, family histories, or personal disappointments.

This is not to deny the central importance of Olofsson using herself, her family and other important relationships, as she herself comments '...it is easy to use myself because I know myself so well...I can show something from within ...that you could never ask a stranger to do.' Nevertheless,

her works do not demand the viewer to bear witness to 'pain' in an individualistic, confessional sense or point to a specific incident and say, 'it was because of that!' Her visual narratives suggest traces of pain and vague memories, rather than definitive ones and require an audience to actively decipher 'the pain' for themselves.

Nicky Bird June 2003

Nicky Bird is an artist, writer and lecturer on contemporary photographic practice.

- 1 Ana Fineš Honigman, from review in 'Tema Celeste', 94 Nov-Dec 2002, p.81
- 2 Art Monthly, Sept 1994, No.179, p.7
- 3 'Inside Anneè Olofsson', 2002, Marianne Boesky Gallery