

# SOURCE

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WHAT IS  
CONCEPTUAL  
PHOTOGRAPHY?

EMMA HART

CAR CRASH

Hart's video and still photography both centre production on the camera as a tool, an extension of the artist's hand, eye and consciousness. In her 2007 piece, *Using the Light from the Camera Screen to Attract Moths*, for example, she does precisely as the title tells us, in order to create a symbiotic relationship between the subject matter and the means of its recording. Hart's camera is no longer a passive device for production, but now makes an active contribution to the content, which moves across its lens in response to its siren invitation. In *Lost (2009-11)*, Hart squeezes her camera into obscure domestic spaces, finding misplaced objects among the detritus of everyday life (bringing to mind the endoscope as it moves through the body). The resultant videos are projected on a large scale, giving a new profundity to the otherwise quotidian subject matter.

This reflects the continuing impact of the camera on the way we perceive and comprehend the reality of our surroundings. As photography has evolved, and continues to evolve, the relationships between the lens and the mind have increasingly approximated those between the eye and the brain. It's become commonplace to observe the democratisation of the image with such technological developments, but it is also true that it has heightened the individualisation of perception, albeit re-socialised and homogenised as a product of its mediation through the heightened communication of, for example, social networking sites. The removal of the camera from direct contact with the eye, in most digital cameras, has paradoxically enhanced this process of selecting our desired *Weltanschauung* through its enclosure within a rectangle.

The wonkiness of the *Car Crash* series highlights the authority of the lens/viewfinder. The only-just-wrong angles make us a little uncomfortable in our awareness that we're looking at photographic evidence of the artist's presence at the scene. The professionalism in the making of the images is evident, but the final act of pressing the button appears to

have been carried out with an intentional lack of concern for pictorial composition – like someone posting a snapshot of their dinner on Facebook.

All the images, in fact, are made in places for eating and drinking and objects on the tables have been given roles in acting out past experiences. To make the work, the artist met with people who had been involved in road accidents and asked them to tell her how the events took place. On the occasions when they used things at hand to illustrate the stories, she photographed their reconstructions. The *Car Crash* series both reverses and confirms the transformative process of *Lost*. On the one hand, the traumatic event is reduced to a tabletop scale in an innocuous environment while, on the other hand, innocent objects mutate into signifiers of violent and perhaps life changing experience.

The positioning of the cups, saucers and spoon on the coffee-shop table show little indication that they signify such an event. At first glance, this could be the natural result of a table in use, other than the displacement of espresso cup and saucer. As an accident scene, though, it has a complexity that suggests a precise rendition of the incident. The dark brown of the tea echoes the clumsy surround of the wooden floor, the seat and discarded leather bag. The white circles, on their green background crossed diagonally with shadows, are, colours notwithstanding, reminiscent of a Malevich composition.

The photograph made in the greasy spoon café is equally informal in its framing, allowing for its visual play to come through. The cuffs on the shirt worn by the man telling the story are almost identical to the blue and white check of the table cloth which dominates the picture space. The floor, too, is tiled in blue and white and the colour of his jeans merges into the tile below his knee. The story of the crash is related through the use of a tomato shaped ketchup bottle and a pepper pot. Wedged between them is a white napkin. The delicacy of this napkin highlights the violence of the event. Surrounding the accident are the

unfinished meals and tea, drops of which have hit the table. The egg, chips and beans take on an ominous presence, the chips splashed with red ketchup, the yolk of the egg spilling from its body. The context of the representation of disaster thus gives new significance to its surroundings. The overhead positioning of the camera, giving the images the look of surveillance photographs taken from the air, confuses our sense of scale.

This distortion of scale informs our reading of all the *Car Crash* images, where the unreliability of memory and the inadequacy of available objects forces us to re-evaluate reality through these faux aerial photographs. The relative sizes of the objects used in the pub piece suggest the most tragic of all. The purse takes on terrifying dimensions and weight, crushing the cigarette packet on which it lies. The lighter has a pathetic vulnerability.

Emma Hart's use of the overhead shot, with its resultant confusion of scale, gives an apparent verisimilitude to the telling of the stories which remain unknown to her audience. Our familiarity with the extended use of the camera as surveillance tool prompts our imaginations to complete stories of which we know virtually nothing. The images, then, indicate the manner by which photography is increasingly impacting on our visual understanding of our individual and shared realities.

Colin Darke







