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Sandra Bridie, b. 1949

*Obscure
(a fiction)*

1996

Interview with Sandra Bridie by B. S. Hope
August 1996

B. S. Hope: Sandra, where did this body of work come from?

Sandra Bridie: Physically, the work has just come down from Sydney; I had a show up there, which finished last week. The source material for these images, though, comes from three distinct places, and that determined how I grouped the works on the walls for this show.

So, where did the three groups of work come from?

Well, the works *Reference*, *View* and *Decipher* are taken from documentation of a performance by Mandy Sharpe. I don't know if you've seen her work, done in the early 1980s. Mandy had left these slides at my house, from her work *Fact*. As a performance, 'Fact' critiqued the assembling and cataloguing of information in institutions such as the public library, the museum and the art gallery. I thought I would like to use these images, Mandy said it was OK, didn't want them back, so The second set of images – *Monologue I*, *Monologue II*, *Soliloquy I* and *Soliloquy II* – come from film. They're stills from two of my films. And the third set, *Image (blue paint)*, *Image (geometric diagram)* and *Image ('legion')*, come from works I've collected, which I have around my home and enjoy looking at.

Are these the two interests you engage in concurrently, film and photography? You began as a film-maker didn't you? How did you become interested in photography?

Yes, I've been making films for many years now, and it's only in the last five years (is it?), that I've become interested in showing still images. I wouldn't go so far as to describe myself as a photographer in the technical sense, I do not use a dark room and am completely unfamiliar with that process. I use commercial labs to develop and

print my photos, so if I produce a 'fine print' it's more of a fluke than anything else. As part of my my newfound identity as a visual artist compared to my profile as a film-maker, I only produce photographs, so I suppose 'photographer' is an apt enough description for what I'm doing currently.

You haven't been interested in pursuing any other type of art practice, painting, sculpture, etc.?

Photographs are a totally natural extension of my film work, as I suppose some sort of installation art might also be for me. But no, it hasn't occurred to me to follow any more paths than the two I am engaged on at present.

What relationship do the photographs have to your films?

The still images mostly derive from my films, though not always. Some of them function as a kind of second narrative to that of a film's narrative, working with what seems to be the film's content, other times the images work in an oppositional way. I re-use or find a dual purpose for an image because I like the idea of an identical image clearly having more than one meaning, but each meaning for the same image being complete unto itself.

What made you think of using the still images as separate works? What's the difference between the experience of showing works in a gallery space, and a cinema?

I've always been curious about the different cultural worlds we can engage in – in my case 'the art world' and 'the film world' – the way in which we learn to move within these places, learn the jargon, etc.; how we learn to utilise images in particular ways to suit our medium. So, my project, I suppose (though I wouldn't have couched this so clearly to myself when I began my photographic work), was to find out what makes each type of image 'click' in its given field; what is the essential difference between an image which moves and one which is still? Of course it all comes down to context; what happens when you

remove the context from a film image? It is stilled, it acquires other readings, other flavours, partly because of the new environment it has been placed in with its accompanying codes and references But I've also found that the image seems to mysteriously, visually acquire a haze, like a mist upon the surface of it, which doesn't seem to be there when that same image moves on a screen.

Isolating an image on a gallery wall has a strange effect. Perhaps this haze I just mentioned really comes from the stillness and whiteness of most galleries, and the focus of the solitary viewer (or perhaps I'm talking about my own peculiar eyesight) contemplating the still image may waver to create that haze. The cinema and the gallery are two entirely different viewing experiences, aren't they? One is dark, peopled and warm, no matter how rarefied the film is, whereas I still find galleries a bit cold and alienating and lonely.

You write the scripts for your films don't you, and up until this show you have used text to accompany your still images. How was the image/text supposed to function, and why have you decided to forego the use of text for this show?

I'll begin answering this question by describing, firstly, the way the script works in my films, then I will talk about the relationships I perceive between some artworks and their text, and how I was interested in playing with that in my own picture/text works prior to this exhibition. For some time now I've been using a visible script in my films, you could almost call this a signature mark, in that I don't know of any other film-makers who consistently do this. What I mean is that, as a kind of structural device, I keep the script always in view of the camera, with the actors reading their lines. I'm not interested in naturalism, and am very interested in bringing the total process of the film being made into full view. ... This isn't a new approach. The script, the second camera, the assistants, the actors not in the action, are all part of this visible armature of my films. So, in regards to text in film, my script is always there when dialogue is being spoken. In four of the works for the upcoming exhibition the text is in evidence – that is, in the four film stills I mentioned earlier. The text in those photos/that film was copied onto transparent acetate and adhered

onto the mirror for scenes where the actor is alone in discussion with her/his reflection, although in one of the images the text is out of frame.

In my 'artwork' my approach to working with text has been much more sceptical or it has been consciously utilised in a critical fashion. I was commenting on what I saw as a pervasive trend in the way 'the accompanying text' worked against the artwork. As an outsider to the art game, I found it queer the way in which 'accompanying texts' – those 'didactic panels' as they're called; or the notes on a work in the catalogue by a writer, or indeed by the artist – would tell the viewer exactly what response to have to the work on the walls, floors, etc., what narrow set of analogies we were to perceive, and just what subconscious or conscious meaning the artist was attempting to convey through the work. These often claimed in a lofty, heroic and romantic fashion what a radical position the artist was taking, doing wondrous things that had never been done before! My thoughts were that the viewer, once having read these texts (though I admit most viewers probably don't read these) had a battle trying to reach their own conclusions about the work. Of course, being who I am, I would have a naturally antagonistic position to these texts, and would 'do my darnedest' to approach the work in another way. So, until working towards this upcoming exhibition, my use of text with pictures has been with this type of viewer manipulation in mind. My texts would prescribe a very narrow reading of the work (which was often quite vague-looking, due either to it's generalised or banal subject matter, or to the fact that it was so unclear focus-wise) that would border on the absurd. I wanted to force the viewer to rebel against the directive of the text, I guess in the same way I often did. I wanted to force the viewer into their own position by being preposterously pedantic.

Can you tell me why you've chosen not to use text in this show?

Well, that approach was a bit of a one-liner, wasn't it? I suppose I've exhausted my venom on that topic. My polemic was based on a very limited knowledge of writing for exhibitions, and on the writing I'd come across about contemporary local artists, and seeing work

in mainly public institutions. By now my general reading on art by contemporary writers has broadened. I am glad to say I have now discovered a few writers who are using their words in relation to art objects in a way that I'm more sympathetic with.

You weren't at all tempted to have writing with this show?

Well ... , you're providing that in the form of this interview, so my written words would be superfluous! No, I just think that these pieces are so convoluted in an optical sense that they don't need any other commentary to confuse the viewer further.

Talk about the optical more; I'd like to comment that I think your viewpoint is very much informed by your occupation as a film-maker, and these images remind me of the types of images that we see in film. Is your viewpoint composed of (what I call) 'the removed image' because you have become so accustomed to seeing the world through a lens? Are you capable of not depicting the optical device, photographing a 'straight' image?

I can do that, my family snapshots are straightforward enough. But you're right – I do find it hard to view things for images without that second lens as frame. The photos here consist of the original image, which was in the form of a transparency, a slide, being re-photographed through a viewing device, and the lens or glass of that viewing device is what frames the image.

But I would even say that your original image is ... estranged in some way, to begin with. What do you have here? There are unfocused slides of artworks blurred beyond recognition; slides of text seen through a bifocal magnifying glass; slides of text written on acetate glued to mirrors. Each of these images was originally photographed as a transparency, that's the first process, then the image is convoluted by being re-photographed through yet another lens of some description or via its reflection in a mirror. My question is, the original image is so distant from even an informed viewer, does it really matter what that image is? Isn't the subject of these works rather 'the act of seeing' itself?

On a simplistic level, you're right, that is what these works are about.

Or perhaps the original image is important – so important that you don't want it to be read by anyone other than yourself?

Well, no, but perhaps this information, what the original image says or is, is only available to a few people. For example; anyone involved in my films, but especially the actors who read the scripts, who will probably see this show, will recognise and enjoy the source of the *Monologue* and *Soliloquy* photos. People who have visited my house, and especially the artists whose work has been used for the *Image* works will know where these came from. People who know Mandy Sharpe's performance work will know the source of those photos. So it's coded information, certainly, but there are a small number of people who'll come to the show who will be able to experience this work from a position of familiarity. There is enough of that audience for the source not to exist purely for my own interpretation. I will also say that the original image is not blank as you suggest, and not merely a pretext to orchestrate works about 'seeing'.

Looking at the photos specifically, why have you selected the different viewing apparatus for the different images?

Partly for reasons of variety. I shot a range of types of photos of each image, each one seen through several types of viewing device: the magnifying glass, three different slide viewers, reflected in one mirror, or two. I wasn't linking the viewing device with the content of the image at all in my head while I was working on them. Finally, in the week before the show in Sydney, I had to select work; I chose a number, ten seemed like a good one this time, and then I selected ten images, which seemed to work together. They fell into three groups of types of images, whose sources incidentally came from three distinct places. I selected photos across the range of viewing devices.

Why is this exhibition called 'OBSCURE'?

The answer to that question is obvious, isn't it!

OK. [Pause] How do the images work, are they meant to work as series, or separately?

Both. I like the way the images inform one another, and work on one another. As single, separate pieces certain images probably work better than others. I'm still not sure whether those of the *Images* group should be seen on their own or together.

You were critical about the way text has been used with artwork to direct the viewer into an impossible position, imposing an interpretation on the work. How do you see the viewer relating to your work then? Do you have an expectation of the viewer? Do you think an artist needs to be responsible for what the viewer might take away with them from a show?

You know, I used to want to have a clear image of every stage of my working process, so that the work I produced would have a pre-existing blueprint somewhere in my head. That would include an image of exactly who the viewer might be and what I expected of them. Perhaps, now I come to think of it, that was my problem with these texts as directives accompanying art. They were, supposedly in an ironic fashion, imposing their expectations on the viewer through overemphasis, while I, partly unknown to myself, maintained the same concrete image of what I wanted the viewer to think about work, only I didn't state it anywhere. I wanted to force the viewer into another position, but still clearly a position that I had imposed on them. I think in this later work I had less of a clear image of how the work would look – and, as a kind of consequence, less of a prescription for what the viewer should think of it. I don't think the work suffers for that.

You seem to be happy to reside in a position as an outsider to photography and the 'art world'. Would it be of any value to gain proficiency in the darkroom? What benefit has amateurism for you?

I don't mind the aesthetic of my work being described as outsider, amateur. I think it's good to have people exhibiting whose work is defined by interests other than the ongoing practice of art and a knowledge of its history; it casts an interesting, slightly aberrant, light on things. On the other hand, I do enjoy seeing a perfect print by a good technician; I think for such work the artist's technical

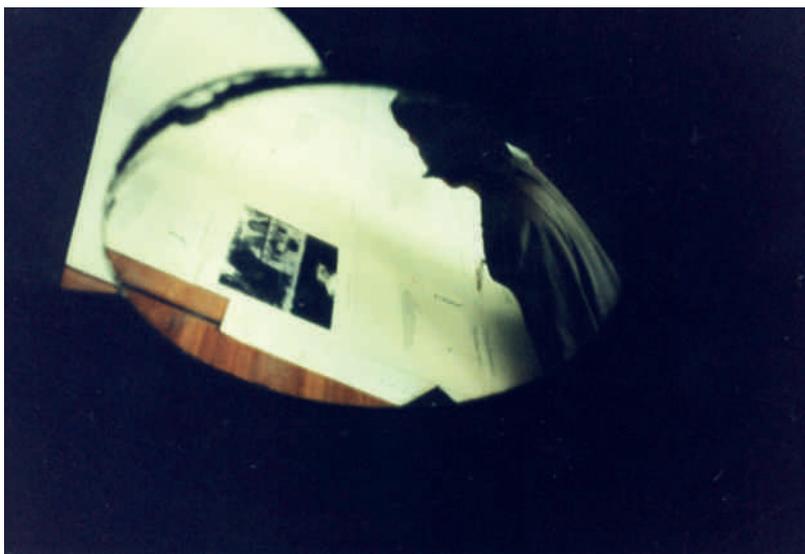
proficiency becomes part of the content of their work, as my amateurism becomes part of the content of mine. For me, though, I am equally happy to get my prints back from the lab with whatever surface spots and scrapes have been left on them. I like the surprise of handing my pieces over to a mechanical process and seeing what returns in the mail.

So, finally, what do your family snapshots look like?

Do you really want me to answer that? Actually, they are a little constructed, I can't help it! The other day, we were in the country, and I set up the camera with the self-timer so that my husband, my son, my daughter and the dog, my daughter's friend and I could all be in the photo. And I took that photo. It was nicely composed. But then (in this first photo the car was behind us) I noticed the image in the car door mirror, and, I had to do it, I made everyone reassemble, so I could take yet another shot of that mirror's image. Somehow that's what I'm more comfortable with, mmm ... reflections. And that mirror shot was such a good photo. The other one was fine also.

Do you have ideas for your next work?

I'm currently working on a film; I am at the editing stage, but as far as photos go, I haven't thought that far ahead.



Reference, 1996

Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm

View, 1996

Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm



Decipher, 1996
Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm

Monologue I, 1996
Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm



Monologue II, 1996
Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm

Soliloquy I, 1996
Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm



Image (blue paint), 1996
Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm

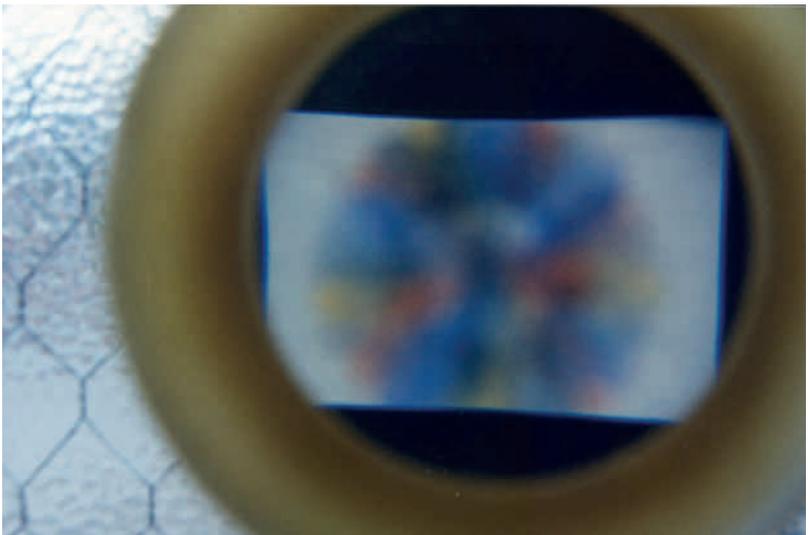


Image (geometric design), 1996
Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm

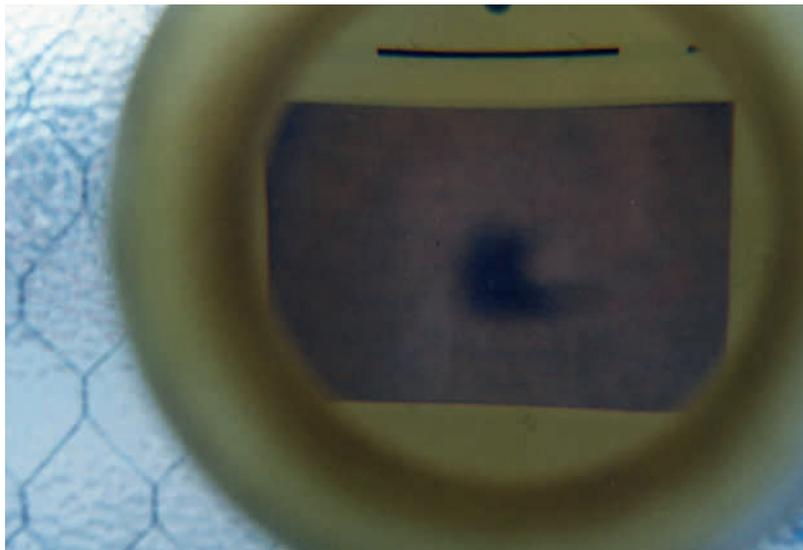


Image (legion), 1996

Colour photograph, 79 x 51cm