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the power of paint on print

BeckerHarrison combines graffiti and photography to historically restate the world



Graffiti's voice has often been used as a mouthpiece for social and political commentary, while photography continues to report back to us the events and emotions of current affairs around the globe. London based mixed-media artists Carolin Becker and Simon Harrison have been bringing together these two strands since 2007, in an innovative approach that challenges the conventions of what we see and expect from these two mediums.

Former fashion model Carolin's fine art photographic images are overlaid with Simon's illustrative graffiti and spray paint techniques, in scenes that have ranged from exploring the education of young women in the Atlas mountains to the painterly and illustrative description of flowers. The duo found themselves in Jaipur in 2008, and turned adversity into art with their response to the terrorist bombings that traumatised the city, with their series 'What A Difference A Day Makes', on show in London this October.

What was once a placid Hindu ritual becomes a scene of impending attack and violence with the addition of a lick of Harrison's spraycan. In doing so, these works raise interesting questions about the retouching of images in the media; while we are accustomed to critiquing the airbrushed perfection of the glossy magazines, BeckerHarrison's overlaid and additional images reveal with paint what lays threateningly concealed. They talk to Glass about their work.

What happens when spray paint and photographic print collide?

Simon: It depends a lot on how you do it. Painting and spraying on other media has obviously been done before but typically emphasising the contrast between different media. We wanted to do something more complementary and seamless, have the graffiti extend the possibilities of photographic realism. We experimented with this in our floral work for the LUMINOSITY show we had last year, and our new work builds on that by really changing the meaning and context of the photographic image. Technically this is quite challenging, but I think we have worked out a way that blends the spray paint quite well into the texture of the print. It takes a lot of planning: the prints are expensive and it gets complicated when you mess it up.

In your opinion, should art be aesthetic or social?

Carolin: Ideally it should be a combination of the two. We think art should be beautiful and interesting. It doesn't necessarily have to be political or social but if you want to make a political or social point you want it to be seen and considered by as many people as possible. For that, it clearly helps if it is aesthetically pleasing. We find that our pictures in the Indian series work on several levels: you look at them because you might find them attractive, then you have a double take because they are a bit improbable, then you try and figure out how they were done and finally you contemplate the social or political message around them. Or at least that is what we like to think.

Your current show arose out of documenting political conflict in Jaipur, if you could choose another similar occasion from any time to treat in a similar way, which would it be and why?

Carolin: The sky is the limit on that question. The Jaipur series just happened to us, it wasn't really planned. Since then however we have looked at lots of other conflicts in the world as possible projects, from the recent red uprising in Thailand to the green revolution in Iran. There is no lack of ideas and as we travel we certainly don't lack inspiration. We have something in the works now but it's too early to talk about it.

Simon: Our concept also doesn't just apply to political conflict. The economic crisis in the west, the cultural changes which accompany economic growth in the east, the increasing divide between old and young or rich and poor right here in London and an infinite number of other

interesting social conflicts all provide rich imagery which lends itself to the kind of 'historical restatement' we applied to the Jaipur pictures.

You're exhibiting in London this October. Which aspects of the city would you most like to capture in your work?

Carolyn: One of our first projects was actually around homeless people in London but we never completed it. I would like to pick that up again at some point. But London has so many really crass contrasts which are worth capturing with our mixed-media approach. We'll get to that eventually.

Simon: I have lived here for most of my life and I guess you tend to take your home town for granted to some extent. I am naturally attracted to the images we take on our travels to South America, north Africa or India, probably because they are more exotic, strange or unexpected. But your question raises a point we have discussed a lot recently: London is probably the most culturally diverse city on the planet. Just look at Carolyn and myself: where else would we have met and embarked on this journey together? I find it fascinating that the same people who fight each other in their home countries seem to get on perfectly well here. This is something we should probably explore further in our work

You've been involved in fundraising for social projects in deprived areas (building a girls' school in Morocco), do you have any more similar projects in the pipeline?

Carolyn: Our current work is focused more on raising awareness rather than actual fundraising. But the power of our being able to have such concrete and specific impact with the Moroccan project has really surprised us and I am sure we'll do something like that again soon.

Graffiti had always been associated with counter-culture, but has since been commoditised into the art establishment, how do you react to this?

Simon: Our approach to the use of graffiti is unconventional. Usually graffiti is seen as a very masculine, aggressive activity. We are using it in a more delicate and sensitive way to make a statement. It is not aggressive and it is supposed to extend the photographic image, not replace or overwhelm it. This kind of work is most definitely not commoditised; it's a synthesis of styles and techniques that hopefully creates something new, which doesn't easily fit conventional categories.

What or who has been the greatest influence on your work?

Carolyn: My feeling is that we are probably each others' greatest influence when it comes to our art work. While I take the picture and Simon sprays onto them the entire process is very much a joint process, which builds on both our sensitivities, imagination, experience and technical abilities. We travel together, we plan the work together, we are usually together both when I take photographs and afterwards in the studio, when Simon works over the print. There are so many decisions to take along the line, which tend to be influenced by both of us. I am not sure why it works so well but it really does. I think trust and our common outlook on the world has a lot to do with it. What a Difference A Day makes by Becker Harrison is on show at The Outsiders, 5-30 October.