Chris Barry, Her Stories
By Raffaele Caputo

In almost all of Chris Barry's photo-montages—particularly her more recent—there is a death-like quality about them. There are obvious image-fragments that testify to this quality, like a row of carcasses hanging in an abattoir, or the head of a cow, upside-down, throat cut, and the last of its blood congealed and hanging like an icicle from its gaping neck.

But even in the most colourful, vibrant, busy, or rhetorical of her collages, one senses a cunning deathliness. At times, this quality is only slightly suggested: from a series titled *Lost in Translation*, portraits of elderly, perhaps immigrant women wearing brightly floral aprons are bordered with an equally bright arrangement of flowers. The intensity of colour contrasts sharply with the grey and sombre faces of the women, and overall, evoke picture-epitaphs that are a common feature of Catholic, particularly European, tombstones.

Other works are made deathly by association. From another series *Displaced Objects*, a medium-shot of an anonymous worker, set against a grey sky in what appears to be an industrial landscape, looks over to the camera from behind a wire fence with a soft and pleasant smile. This image is framed on all of its four sides with fragments of other images, some appear as if pulled out of a family album, while others are fragments of the same industrial site. But also outlining the top and bottom of the image are pieces of barbed wire stretching the width of the entire work.

The barbed wire is at first unassuming, then emblematic. The wire is spotted with red paint as though bloodied, and links the image of the worker to another (hypothetical) time and place. Possibly that of a war-torn country, a battlefield or an internment camp. There is the sense of a minor, individual and personal history unfolding, but not of course through a series of continuous images. Rather, the discontinuous bits of images that are arranged over, across and around the central image of the worker (he is entombed, so to say) propose an equivalence between this scenario and another, perhaps one belonging to his past. The work, after all is titled *Synonymous*.

At this point it may be worthwhile to suggest that in general the use of photo-montage is already a technique which sounds a low-pitched death-knell. Images of people, objects or events are cut out from their original, continuous, natural or familiar context and then newly arranged in a fragmentary scenario. The newly formed image takes precedence, yet discontinuity is the main principle of composition. The fact still remains that everything is a cut-out. Each fragment is a vestige of a past, a scene that is now absent, and thus something of a ghost-like reminder. This is particularly so in the series *Lost in Translation*.

The most forceful of Barry's recent work brings this quality of the photo-montage closer to motion picture montage. It may seem paradoxical to bring together a medium where montage serves a naturally linear and moving form, with one whose form is naturally static, non-progressive. Indeed, it arrests motion. But "montage is conflict", to borrow a well-known dictum of Soviet filmmaker Sergi Eisenstein.

There are two recent examples prominent in this respect: *History Painting No. 1* and *History Painting No. 2* barely compare with the multi-layered construction of Barry's earlier work. Two contrasting images will suffice, and each image is assembled in sequence rather than as a mass of varying bits and pieces heaped over and around each other. The images of *History Painting No. 2* are simply a building and a clump of trees. These images are repeated over and over again, though not in the same manner. Sometimes the images are superimposed, or are seen upside-down, while still more of the same images are seen in different stages of fading away. Unlike the majority of Barry's earlier work, there is a distinct lack of colour. They often appear washed out, as though drained of colour, lifeless, which adds to the funereal quality of the work. Together, they form several vertical strips which hang from ceiling to floor, and which resemble enormous strips of motion picture film.

The analogy with cinema is not accidental. *History Painting No. 1* is similar though evermore potent, for among the repeated images of a building and a clump of trees is included one of hanging carcasses of cattle. This recalls a celebrated sequence of Eisenstein's film *October* (1926), in which a scene of soldiers being shot is juxtaposed with an image of cattle being slaughtered.

As in this example from *October*, the succeeding combination of images in both of these works by Chris Barry is what is called metaphorical montage. Each image functions as the paradigmatic combination of generalized ideas, albeit conflicting. The building stands for "culture/society", the trees for "nature" and the cattle for "extinction". Their combination is certainly funeral: the existence of the building (culture/society) can mean or point to the disappearance of trees (nature). And in the next instance, so too is the inverse combination funereal: the disappearance of nature can mean or point to the extinction (cattle) of culture/society. Rather than a direct casual relation between the images, their combination highlights the paradigmatic foil in each.

Thus, finally it is apt these two works be called *History Paintings 1* and *2*, for this type of montage is one which frustrates the auspicious narrative sweep that is the historian's main task at hand. It seems appropriate that Chris Barry's earlier work would find resonance in this metaphorical use of photomontage: this particular use stands distinct from how we have come to practice and understand History as a metonymic process. One which entombs other stories.

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