

LOOKING CLOSELY AT Miriam Stannage

Although Miriam Stannage is a painter and has produced drawings and prints, she has made extensive use of photography throughout her career as an artist. She has a fascination with the image and puts together a collection of often everyday objects and gives them meanings that may be unexpected. The viewer is challenged by the associations formed and the juxtaposition of objects in relation to one another. Photography gives her the opportunity to construct and then record meanings. The camera is an extension of the human eye, a mechanical eye.

Photography

Photography was invented in the mid 19th century and revolutionised the way in which the world was viewed. The taking of photographs became a possibility for everyone and was a popular hobby. Stannage makes the camera work for her and uses it as a device to explore the complexity of "seeing". Each work is composed with painstaking attention to detail and reflects her experience, physical, intellectual and spiritual.

Miriam Stannage was born in 1939 in Northam, a country town east of Perth. She studied with William Boissevain and Henry Froud and at the Claremont Technical College. Stannage was a founder member of the Contemporary Art Society. She has travelled extensively and taught art therapy, painting and drawing and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Curtin University in 1998.



Miriam Stannage, *Information* 1991-1992. 25 silver gelatin prints. detail

Perception, See, Look

Perception. noun 1 vision, sight, seeing, eyesight, discernment, perspicacity, acumen, sensation, impression, consciousness, awareness. 2 cognition, comprehension, appreciation, knowledge, grasp, consciousness, awareness, realisation, discernment, understanding, judgement, sense, wisdom. 3. insight, intuition, astuteness, acumen, sensitivity. ant. 1 blindness, sightlessness. 2 incomprehension, unawareness, ignorance. 3 dullness, obtuseness, insensitivity. **See.** verb 1 to perceive with the eyes. 2 to perceive (an idea) mentally, understand. 3 to perceive with any or all of the senses. **Look.** verb 1 to direct the eyes. 2 to direct one's attention (towards). 3 to search or seek.

'Perception' has been a pre-occupation with the artist throughout her career. She describes herself as an artist concerned with the relationship between what we see and what we know, between the mechanics of perception and the nature of representation on a two dimensional surface. Life-cycle, mortality and death are also concerns for her.

Stannage often takes a single object, repeated and carefully arranged, with a variety of other objects, to provoke thought and a response from the viewer. Photography is central to her current practice and she is now working with computer generated images, which offers possibilities in terms of manipulating images digitally.

Note: Much of the material for this sheet was collected in conversation with the artist in August 2001.

Technique

In Stannage's work technique is a means to an end. Photography is used as a device to explore the complexities of "seeing" and particularly suits her conceptual needs. There is a pre-occupation with still life and the object, and each work is composed with painstaking attention to detail. Stannage says "photographs are an inventory of mortality, they have a melancholy pathos and nostalgia which attracts me", and, "photographs can show what the eye cannot see to paint".

The artist also believes that photographs are autobiographical, by virtue of the photographer being there, "he/she actually has contact with the subject".

Series

A characteristic of Stannage's work is the series. The series insists that the viewer move from one image to the next, thus creating a narrative. Often words are included and whilst the style may be minimal there are many layers of meaning. The viewer should be prepared to read as well as look.

Social comment and a commitment to the social and political, to contemporary events, pervades the artist's work. The dual concerns of people and nature are at the core of her art practice.

The symbols used are "generally public and traditional" and are always ordinary and commonplace and therefore immediately recognisable to the viewer. It is what the artist does with them that is central and conveys the message.

Art changes the way we see the world

Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Information*

The 'Information' sign used in this work was amongst a crate full of signs found by the artist at a local disposal store. These were rejects from public places, from shops, from street corners; signs designed to assist people to manage their affairs; signs that we have grown to rely on in our daily lives. The artist selected the sign *Information* and produced a series of 25 photographic prints, each one with the sign centrally placed, but juxtaposed with elements that are surprising, a deliberate strategy by the artist to make people "look closely".

pun noun. a play on words, usually for humorous effect.
irony noun. the humorous or mildly sarcastic use of words to imply the opposite of what they normally mean.

Stannage employs both of these techniques in her work, both verbally and visually. Can you find instances of this? Do you find the work amusing?

This Looking Closely Sheet gives information about a work titled *Information*. We are looking closely at information. Is there any humour in this? Or irony? Do you need information about *Information*? Does the information on this sheet help you to read, to look closely? Does looking closely at information help you to understand the work? Is this a rather ironic concept?

The artist often goes on camping trips to the bush. The "information" sign was taken on one of these trips, placed in the landscape and then photographed. Can you recognise what makes up the background in each photograph? You will notice that not all the backgrounds belong to the outdoors. Where do the others belong? Would you be surprised to find a sign saying "information" in some of these places? What ideas are suggested by these works?



Could you describe these photographs as still lifes? For Stannage, a still life in the landscape represents man in the land. The land is represented in most of the photos. Is the artist giving her point of view about man's effect on the landscape, or how man regards the landscape? Footprints, bits of rusty iron, seeds, shells, bubble wrap, fencing wire, shredded newspaper, mining core samples, fossils, rocks, video tape etc. Is there a story here?

This work was made in 1991-1992 when there was a lot of talk about information technology and the effect of computers and the internet. Phrases like information overload and information explosion were being used. By the use of repetition, does the artist address any of these issues? Does this sheet contribute to the information explosion? Does it overload you with information? Is the artist prompting you think about these ideas.

Miriam Stannage, *Information*
1991-1992. 25 silver gelatin prints. detail

