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Magical Surfaces
The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

13 April – 19 June 2016

Press Coverage

WIDEWALLS

Parasol unit presents an exploration of the uncanny through contemporary photography

Sanja Espasmo, Widewalls, 22 March 2016, <http://www.widewalls.ch/parasol-unit-photography-exhibition-london/>

PARASOL UNIT PRESENTS AN EXPLORATION OF THE UNCANNY THROUGH CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Art Exhibitions, Photography • Sanja Espasmo



The term “**uncanny**” is often used to describe an idea which is exceeding one’s knowledge. **Friedrich Schelling**, philosopher, wrote a book under the name *Philosophie der Mythologie* in 1835, describing the uncanny (das Unheimliche in German) as everything that became visible but that **should have stayed secret and unrevealed** (which was later elaborated by **Sigmund Freud**, in his *The Uncanny* essay from 1919). Humans are predestined to explain their reality in order to adapt to it. Therefore, rationalization can be understood as a defense mechanism triggered by our disconformity with natural, or better said non-human-built environment. Bearing that in mind, human

race is actually terrified of instability and in need to understand everything. Leaving aside one's perception of the reality (which is highly subjective and vague), a disturbing feeling when something is both well-known and unknown (without clear distinction between reality and fantasy) is the repercussion of the uncanny experience. **Parasol unit** is scrutinizing the uncanny by presenting the works of seven artists, which are using different forms of photography as a tool throughout an exhibition called ***Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography.***



Stephen Shore – U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973, printed 2002 – Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York

Seven as the Number of Perfection, Security, Safety and Rest

In the *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography*, David Claerbout is messing with the observers' minds by showing a digital three-dimensional reconstruction of *The King*" (Elvis Presley) from the 1950s black-and-white photograph, when he was just a handsome kid in a family environment. In the meantime, Jörg Sasse is one of the first artists who did show to the world that an artificially made photograph can look as real as any other. Joel Sternfeld and Stephen Shore were capturing time and sites back in 1970s, while travelling across America (although separately). They were using 35-mm cameras and Kodachrome films to capture the unmistakably uncanny moments on their way. Shore and Sternfeld's photographs are still encouraging young artists to sharpen their minds and never lose the spirit of vanguard. The magic that other four artists create is left unrevealed in order for the viewers to explore the uncanny on their own.



Jörg Sasse – 2729, 2012 – Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Wilma Tolksdorf

It Had to Start Somewhere

Parasol unit will present works of seven artists from two generations – Sonja Braas, Julie Monaco, David Claerbout, Jörg Sasse, Elger Esser, Stephen Shore, and Joel Sternfeld. **Sonja Braas** (born in Siegen, Germany, 1968) graduated in Visual Communication, Photography and Film Design at Fachhochschule in Dortmund. Braas also studied Visual Art in New York, where she lives and works since 1997. **David Claerbout** (born 1969 in Kortrijk, Belgium) studied the Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp. He was a member of the DAAD: Berlin Artists-in-Residence program back in 2002–03. He can be seen both in Berlin, Germany, and Antwerp, Belgium, where he lives and works. Elger Esser (born in Stuttgart, Germany, 1967) lived as a child in Rome. Fortunately for the German art scene, he now lives and works in Düsseldorf. He is Bernd Becher's student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. From 2016, Esser is a holder of the Oskar-Schlemmer-Preis. **Julie Monaco** (born in Vienna, Austria, 1973) studied the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, and 3-D animation at Raleigh Studios in Los Angeles, USA. She lives and works in Vienna. **Jörg Sasse** (born in 1962, Bad Salzuflen, Germany) was also Bernd Becher's student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Young photographers' inspiration, **Stephen Shore** (1947) and **Joel Sternfeld** (1944), were both born in New York City, but only Sternfeld still works and lives there (Shore is currently in Tivoli, New York). Sternfeld was awarded the Guggenheim fellowships and the Prix de Rome.



Joel Sternfeld – McLean, Virginia, December 1978, printed 2003 – Courtesy of the Zabłudowicz Collection

Parasol Unit – The Unifier of the Magnificent Seven

What connects these **seven artists** is their talent of being able to take the observer out of the familiar place, using the face value of photographs to reveal the uncanny and dubious nature hidden somewhere in their depths. All of them have a different approach in revealing the uncanny nature of photographs – that is where their mastery lies. ***Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography*** will be accessible **from April 13 until June 26, 2016**, following the **preview** which will take place on **April 12, 2016, from 6.30PM until 9PM**, at [Parasol Unit](#), 14 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW. The exhibition will be followed by a **publication** consisting of **essays by Ziba Ardalan, David Claerbout, and Marta Dahó** (teacher of History of Photography and independent curator from Barcelona).

Images courtesy of David Claerbout, Stephen Shore, Jörg Sasse, Sean Kelly Gallery, Micheline Szwajcer Gallery, 303 Gallery, Galerie Wilma Tolksdorf and Zabłudowicz Collection.

Featured image: David Claerbout – KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley), 2015-16 – Courtesy of the artist and galleries, Sean Kelly, New York, and Micheline Szwajcer, Brussels.



Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography at Parasol unit in London

Yatzer, 23 March 2016, <https://www.yatzer.com/magical-surfaces-parasol-london>

Due to open on April 13th at the Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art in London, the exhibition “Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography” is curated by Ziba Ardalan and deals with the uncanny as evoked by the work of seven contemporary artists from two generations. Although each of these artists explore different themes and use different techniques, all of the works showcased at the exhibition present something both otherworldly and familiar that conjures a feeling of unease. Freud described this in his 1919 essay *The Uncanny* as “that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar”; all seven of the exhibition’s artists exploit this quality in one way or another by blurring the distinction between reality and fantasy through the medium of photography.

Working at the intersection of photography and film, Belgian artist David Claerbout explores the passage of time by visually expanding the momentary. In his 2015 piece “KING (after Alfred Wertheimer’s 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)” he has digitally reconstructed a 1950s black-and-white photograph of Elvis using fragments of hundreds of original photographs of his skin in an eerie three-dimensional projection that zooms in and out allowing viewers an unprecedented proximity to the star. Düsseldorf-based Elger Esser’s work also deals with time, in his case, the search for lost time. Inspired by postcards which have fascinated him since childhood, his work revolves around the experience of travel. His images, large-scale enchanted land and seascapes—or “states of mind” as Esser calls them—are meticulously constructed by superimposing Chromogenic prints and héliogravures, eliciting a nostalgia that taps into the viewer’s past, provoking a longing for meaning.

Seascapes are also the purview of Vienna-based artist Julie Monaco but in her case, they eschew romanticism for cinemascope-like abstraction. Her images, realistic as they first appear, are wholly computer-generated based on fractal algorithms, numerical codes and other computational tools, amplified by both digital and analog layering and overlapping. The mesmerizing result of this process which bridges the fields of painting and photography is the creation of a completely artificial reality of gloom. Combining Elger Esser's romanticism of nature with Julie Monaco's contrivance, New York-based Sonja Braas' "Forces" series depict nature at its most dramatic although many of the images are of models built by the artist and photographed in the studio. The absence of any point of reference forces viewers to make their own assumptions and distinguish between what's real and what's not. Similarly questioning the power of documentary photography, German artist Jörg Sasse, one of the first artists to use computer technology, digitally manipulates found footage—usually land and cityscapes—in order to imbue a magic realism that both obscures and questions the picture's authenticity.

One generation older than the rest of the artists whose work features in the exhibition, American photographers Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld travelled independently across the USA in the 70s, photographing ordinary and banal settings in such evocative compositions as to reveal a hidden, uncanny dimension. Using Kodachrome film and 35-mm cameras, they were pioneers of colour photography using colour "to provide", as Sternfeld explains, "some level of abstraction that can take the image out of the daily". And indeed, their images, like those of the younger artists on display, imbue the familiar with the dream-like, tapping into the viewers' subconscious, thus enabling them to project their fears, anxieties or longings onto them.

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography – Parasol unit

Amy Smith, Camden Review, 24 March 2016, <http://www.camdenreview.com/magical-surfaces-the-uncanny-in-contemporary-photography-parasol-unit>

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography - Parasol Unit



David Claerbout:KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley) 2015

Published: 24 March, 2016

by AMY SMITH

"THE Uncanny" has long been a preoccupation for artists, referring to that feeling of uncertainty when something is both intensely familiar and unfamiliar. The latest group show at Parasol unit, *Magical Surfaces*, showcases contemporary photography exploring, or evoking, this sense of unease.

First coined 180 years ago, it took Freud to bring The Uncanny firmly into public consciousness with his essay in 1919. He considered the experience to be positioned somewhere between real and imagined and that caused cognitive dissonance - hence a feeling of unease and, sometimes, terror.

The notion of a photograph presenting “truth” has always been flimsy. It is that ambiguous and pervasive ability of technology to surplant reality that can make us look again at an image. The analogue and digital images within the show cover four decades and range from wholesale manipulation to the authoring process of framing.

The most recent piece in the show is David Claerbout’s KING (after Alfred Wertheimer’s 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley), 2015, an almost supernatural HD animated composite of Elvis Presley. The apparent 360-degree rotating close-up of the singer in swimming trunks, holding a bottle of Pepsi Cola is instantly recognisable. And yet it works also as an abstract of his identity - made up from numerous details from early Elvis photographs Claerbout gives us intimate access to this icon; the camera slowly pans over his bare feet and legs, torso and shoulder.

“Paradoxical as it may sound, photography is the one medium in visual art that has the power to both capture and author reality,” says curator Ziba Ardalan. “It is therefore the medium, par excellence, that exemplifies the concept of the uncanny. Recent advances in digital technology have provided ever more powerful techniques with which to generate and amplify an intriguing sense of the uncanny, making it an attribute of contemporary life.”

• ***Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography*** runs at the Parasol unit from April 13-June 19

Life & Arts: Critics' Choice – Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Jackie Wullschlager, Critics' Choice – The Financial Times, 9/10 April 2016

★ FT Weekend

Critics' choice

Life&Arts



'KING
(after Alfred
Wertheimer's
1956 picture
of a young
man named
Elvis
Presley)'
(2015-16) by
David
Claerbout
David Claerbout/
Sweet Kelly New
York/Artforum
Suzanne Branson

compositions imitate 17th-century Dutch seascapes or Italian *vedute*, and Jörg Sasse's large-format frontal scenes such as the bands of sky, water, sand in "1563" are staged, collaged computer images; both artists are shaped by Bernd and Hilla Becher's dispassionate, formal Düsseldorf school.

But Parasol intriguingly places the Europeans alongside 1970s American photographs in documentary manner: a tiny white wooden church ("Drive Safely, Drive with God") in a vast arid landscape in Stephen Shore's "Bellevue, Alberta", Joel Sternfeld's zoo escapee on a highway, "Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington", and a lone child surveying a barbecue on a bare, endless plain in "Great Salt Lake, Utah". As bizarre and unsettling as the contemporary manipulations, these record images from road trips through prairies, small towns, bringing reality into dialogue with the imaginary and effacing the difference between them, for as Sternfeld says, "any time you put a frame to the world, it's an interpretation."
parasol-unit.org, 020 7490 7373, April 13-June 26

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography
Parasol Unit, London

In Sonja Bruus's "Firestorm", a night cityscape and a starry sky are juxtaposed with a horizon line of a blazing fire between them, seeming to advance towards us, and transforming two familiar, cosy

images into something eerie, even apocalyptic.
Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar". How contemporary photographers manipulate images to generate unease and ambiguity, questioning the nature of perception and

knowledge, is the subject of this clever, ambitious, unusual show. David Claerbout digitally reconstructs a 1950s photograph to bring a young Elvis Presley to life in a 3D projection, "KING". Julie Monaco's turbulent cloudscapes turn out to be computerised abstractions, made with fractal algorithmic software. Elger Esser's

Wallpaper*

The Uncanny and the Familiar

Paula Erizanu, **Wallpaper**, 13 April 2016, <http://www.wallpaper.com/gallery/art/in-pictures-the-w-photography-desks-daily-digest-of-visual-inspiration-2016#154228>



The uncanny and the familiar

13 April

At a first glance, American photographer Stephen Shore's *Badlands National Monument, South Dakota, July 14, 1973* is all about the familiar – indeed, in the 1970s Shore expressed an aesthetic agenda of making pictures that looked 'natural'. But by only having access to the back of the isolated hut and car surrounded by mountains, and seeing the shadow but not the tree, the image could equally serve as setting for a bloody Truman Capote narrative.

The picture is part of the exhibition 'Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography', on view at the [Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art](#) in London, until 19 June.

The exhibition is inspired by philosopher Friedrich Schelling and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's essays on the uncanny. Where Schelling defined the term as 'everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible', Freud was interested in the concept as 'that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar'.

The show also features work by Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse and Joel Sternfeld.

Pictured: *Badlands National Monument, South Dakota, July 14, 1973*, by Stephen Shore. *Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York*

Writer: Paula Erizanu

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography, Parasol unit

Sarah Kent, The Arts Desk, 14 April 2016, <http://www.theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/magical-surfaces-uncanny-contemporary-photography-parasol-unit>

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography, Parasol unit

Making it and faking it: two generations transcend the everyday
by [Sarah Kent](#) Thursday, 14 April 2016



'McLean, Virginia, December 1978' by Joel Sternfeld © Joel Sternfeld, courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York and Zabłudowicz Collection

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography focuses on two contrasting generations. Beginning in the 1970s, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld travelled America photographing things that are so ordinary, yet so odd, that they

transcend the familiar to become surreal. And alongside them are five Europeans, 20 or so years younger who, by and large, seem glued to their computers.

Joel Sternfeld's *McLean, Virginia, December 1978* (**main picture**) is one of my all-time favourites. In the background is a house on fire; flames are spurting from the roof. Luckily, a crane is in place to rescue the occupants, but the fireman has gone AWOL. Instead of saving lives, he is choosing a pumpkin from the nearby farm stall. Squashed pumpkins litter the foreground; the same bright orange as the fireman's jacket and the flames they seem to be part of the unfolding tragedy, as though presaging disaster. Since photography stops time, we will never know the outcome; this inexplicable event will endlessly remain an enigma and retain its fascination.

In another photograph, an elephant is holding up the traffic. Someone is hosing down the hapless creature, which has collapsed in the middle of a country road; but the sheriff is at hand, so this bizarre emergency may yet be resolved.



Knowing that these scenes were witnessed rather than fabricated is crucial to our enjoyment of the photographs. Even finding out that the fire was part of an exercise and the elephant a circus runaway fails to destroy the magic. If we were to discover that the images had been manipulated or digitally created, though, their value would be cancelled. Photography's link to actuality is of primary importance, I think; sever that connection and you are in danger of losing the plot. The brilliance of Sternfeld's pictures comes from the unlikely narratives they record; by contrast, Stephen Shore specialises in stillness and the absence of people and events. With its slanting sunlight and deep shadows, *Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts ... 1974* looks like a film set waiting for the director to shout "action" and some extras to scurry round the corner.

The white painted church in Bellevue, Alberta (**pictured above right: August 21, 1974**) is so small that it looks like a model. Since there's no garden or courtyard, [the picket fence](#) flanking the doorway serves no purpose other than to aggrandise the entrance and create a sense of place. Painted blue and white, it chimes with the clouds scudding across the sky, yet appears completely out of place. Who put this little box in the middle of nowhere and why? Shore is like an anthropologist looking for clues to explain some alien culture, or a philosopher ruminating on our place in the greater scheme of things.



A billboard has been erected beside Highway 97 (**pictured above: US 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973**) showing a snow-clad mountain reflected in the still waters of a blue lake. But the slogans have been painted out so its not clear why this picture of a rural idyll has been erected here, especially as it compares unfavourably with the surrounding landscape; the sky above and the grasses beneath are so much more dramatic and palpable than the billboard scene. Shore seems to be making a point about the paucity of human imagination when compared with the real thing; the joke, of course, is that the landscape being compared with the billboard is itself an image – his photograph.

Elger Esser (Germany) seems to have been looking at paintings. We are gazing across the Venetian lagoon from an inlet on the deserted island of Poveglia that once housed an asylum. The view is framed by two banks, one wooded, the other bearing the remains of an empty building. Suffused in golden light, this elegiac scene is reminiscent of a painting by [Turner](#) or Claude. The delicate light may have been digitally enhanced, but who cares when its fragile beauty seems to encapsulate something of the island's melancholy history.

If you've ever climbed a mountain and marvelled at the blueness of the distant hills and noticed how the dwindling light has the infinite subtlety of water colour washes, you will not be impressed by Jörg Sasse's (Germany) attempts to duplicate the effect in an ink jet print. Distance has been collapsed; the nearby range is as uniformly black as a cardboard cut-out and the layered space beyond is more like a sequence of theatre flats than a mountain range receding into the distance.

Julie Monaco (Austria) also fakes it; *cs_02/4*, 2005, is an apocalyptic view of lowering clouds swirling above a boiling sea. The image is not very large yet it has the breadth and drama of a painting by John Martin, [the English romantic](#) who enjoyed terrifying viewers with fire and brimstone depictions of the ungodly being dispatched by divine wrath. Yet a deep sense of “so what?” infuses my response. There’s no inherent meaning in the technical trickery.



David Claerbout (Belgium) photographs traffic jams from various angles, then inserts shots of people taken in the studio. Police, fire fighters, drivers and passengers watch and wait, while you wonder why. Whereas Sternfeld’s narratives encourage contemplation of the human condition, these theatrical scenes provoke little speculation beyond the most obvious.

In 1956 Alfred Wertheimer took a photo of Elvis as a gauche young man in boxer shorts. With this photo as a starting point, Claerbout takes us on a 3D tour of Elvis’s body using skin fragments sampled from hundreds of photographs and knitted into a continuum. If the initial photograph is already creepy, this video enlargement is as unreal as a journey round a waxwork (**pictured above left: still from *KING*, after Alfred Wertheimer’s 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley, 2016**). My advice to the younger generation is to get out more.

- [Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography](#) at Parasol Unit until 19 June

The uncanny in contemporary photography on view at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art

Artdaily.org, 15 April 2016, <http://artdaily.com/news/86524/The-uncanny-in-contemporary-photography-on-view-at-Parasol-Unit-for-Contemporary-Art>

The uncanny in contemporary photography on view at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art



David Claerbout, KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley, 2015-2016. Single-channel video projection, HD animation, black-and-white, silent, 10-minute loop. Courtesy the artist and galleries Sean Kelly, New York and Micheline Szwajcer, Brussels.

LONDON.- [Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art](http://artdaily.com/news/86524/The-uncanny-in-contemporary-photography-on-view-at-Parasol-Unit-for-Contemporary-Art) presenting Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography, an exhibition that explores the uncanny as exemplified in the works of seven artists from two generations, all of whose work includes in different forms the use of photography as a medium. They are: Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld.

As early as 1835, the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling wrote of "das Unheimliche", the uncanny, as 'everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible'. Years later, Sigmund Freud elaborated on what Schelling and others had thought about this 'peculiar quality', but he also 'felt impelled' to investigate it in relation to aesthetics. In his influential essay 'The "Uncanny"', 1919, Freud saw there was a common thread to everything that arouses our sense of the uncanny: it 'is that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar'. Although individual responses are complex and subjective, what we experience as uncanny is that which gives us a feeling of unease when something seems both familiar and unfamiliar, when some quality effaces the distinction between the imagined and the real.

The Magical Surfaces title of this exhibition derives from the thoughts of Vilém Flusser who, in his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 1983, wrote of photographic images as 'significant surfaces' and of 'the magical nature of images'. We are always intrigued when an apparently straightforward image suddenly takes on an ambiguous, uncanny, quality as our mind grasps, as Ernst Jentsch wrote in 1906, its 'intellectual uncertainty'.

The mastery each of the exhibiting artists has over their own process of manipulating the photographic image invites us to marvel at the many ways the uncanny can occur in photographic works. Essentially exploring time in his work, David Claerbout does indeed appear to do magic by bringing a pre-stardom Elvis Presley intimately back to life in three-dimensions by digitally reconstructing him from a 1950s black-and-white photograph. Julie Monaco's often hyper-real and dramatically turbulent scenes appear at first to be images of nature, but in fact are created entirely on her computer using fractal algorithmic software. An absence of presence is discernible in the apparently realistic images created by Jörg Sasse, one of the first artists to use computer technology as his brush and canvas. Both he and Elger Esser studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Prof. Bernd Becher, who together with his wife Hilla is renowned for their remarkable photographs of industrial buildings. Esser, too, deals with time and memory in his serenely lit and composed land- and seascapes that seem at once to be both familiar and unfamiliar.

Sonja Braas works entirely in analogue, sometimes from ready-made sources, often by artificially creating landscapes or by building models which she then photographs, rather than directly photographing actual nature. Among other things, her work questions what is real and what is unreal in any image. In the 1970s, both Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld travelled independently across the USA, taking what are evocatively revealing photographs of the time and place. Using Kodachrome film and 35-mm cameras, they managed to capture an atmosphere that is almost palpably uncanny. Their work continues to inspire subsequent generations of artists to continue innovating with photography. As Sternfeld says: 'Photography has always been capable of manipulation. [...] any time you put a frame to the world, it's an intervention [...] photographs have always been authored.'

This exhibition is curated by Ziba Ardalan, Founder/Director of Parasol unit. It is accompanied by a comprehensive publication which includes essays by Ziba Ardalan, David Claerbout, and Marta Dahó who is an independent curator and teacher of History of Photography, based in Barcelona.

Photomonitor:

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Paul Carey-Kent, **Photomonitor Magazine**, 21 April 2016,

<http://www.photomonitor.co.uk/2016/04/magical-surfaces-uncanny-contemporary-photography-2/>



Group Show

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

13.04.16 - 19.06.16

Parasol Unit / London / England

- **Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography / Reviewed by Paul Carey-Kent / 21.04.16**

You may reckon it all too canny of curators to make the viewer-friendly concept of ‘the uncanny’ a frequent theme of their programming, but the Parasol Unit claims to be the first to examine it in the specific context of photography and of the analogue–digital divide. So what makes for uncanniness, and do the works in the show invoke it? Freud’s classic definition focused on how the homely is rendered strange, even as we recognise it as familiar. That may manifest itself in different ways, but it’s that hard-to-pin-down aura of slippage between registers which makes the uncanny a useful category, and we should resist extending the term to cover what is merely odd, creepy, out of time, or not what it first seems to be.

‘Magical Surfaces’ has three analogue photographers and four who use digital construction in various ways. The sample suggests that, as soon as you start trying to construct the uncanny effect, it gets harder to achieve. There are two ‘old masters’ present in American photographers Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld, each with five well-known images, straight analogue colour

photographs from their storied criss-crossings of the US during the 1970's. Their work is not routinely classified as uncanny, but that positioning makes a lot of sense, for we are certainly looking at ordinary places, yet there's a sense of the extraordinary behind it. In *Shore* it's not so much his subjects – manmade structures isolated in the landscape – as the intensity with which they are presented which trips the suspicion that they stand in for something more. You might say that Sternfeld's effects reverse that: by presenting incongruous happenings in the landscape as if they are perfectly routine, he triggers the possibility that they represent a general weirdness in the world: an elephant on the road, a firefighter buying pumpkins as a blaze goes on, toy earth-moving equipment on a suburban lawn – all leave us wondering how their normalising narratives might operate.

The third analogue photographer is the New York based German Sonja Braas. A single image from each of three distinct series maximises the potential for confusion: one 'real' landscape, made to look artificial; one found fake landscape (from a museum diorama); and one photograph of her own studio-made model from the 2008 series 'The Quiet of Dissolution', which seems at first to have required her to get too dangerously close to natural disasters. The obvious comparison is with Thomas Demand: he also constructs and photographs models, but makes it plain that are cardboard simulacra. Braas's 'Firestorm', 2008, looks more like a real scene or a digital collage than the model it is, so the strangeness of the firestorm is transposed into the familiarity of the model, only to feed back into the possibility that the natural world is itself a model of sorts – God's design in one set of beliefs, the working through of natural laws in another. The uncanny aspect doesn't – as you might expect – collapse into the exposure of an illusion.

That, though, is what does happen in the case of Julie Monaco. Once you realise that her stormy romantic seascapes are digital constructs, nothing uncanny remains: the explanation sucks out the ambiguity. Similarly, the fact that Jörg Sasse's landscapes are digital collages, and that we can't quite tell the joins or place the sources, doesn't create any unease. They are what they are, even if that isn't what they first seem to be. Elger Esser's 'technical images', as Villem Flusser terms such artificial productions, compile found images to take on the aesthetic of sublime paintings and – in Ziba Ardalán's catalogue words – 'embody the uncanny in the magical and timeless quality of their atmospheres'. But do they? We're familiar with how landscapes have been interpreted in art history, and can admire how subtly Esser reworks those tropes – but the slippage feels comfortable. Monaco, Sasse and Esser complicate the boundary between reality and fiction, true, but that's the mainstream understanding of photography nowadays, so while it may make for interesting images, I didn't find myself disoriented.

Is it, then, impossible to achieve the right sort of ungraspable ambiguity by digital means? The remaining artist, David Claerbout, shows that it isn't. Perhaps that's because he starts from historic still photography, from which he teases out some of the aspects of time which are always latent in the medium, but which are undermined by digital interventions. 'Highway Wreck (suite)', 2013-16 shows – as stills and as a slide show from different viewpoints – the reconstruction of a 70 year old source photograph of a car crash. We are at various removes – through time, distance, silence, peripherality, colourlessness – from the violence of the crash, and yet the appearance is sufficiently documentary to haunt us. The ten minute animation 'KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)', 2015 presents a 360 degree tour of a static swimsuited Elvis at home with his family before he found fame, the details of his skin built up from multiple photographs showing some part of it. Most of the footage is spent on semi-abstracted details of Presley's body and fuller appearances of the surrounding family members before the camera (as it seems) pulls back to reveal the now-iconic face. It's a 2D showing of a 3D black and white reconstruction made from 2D photographs. There's a slippage in celebrity which relates to the uncanny: we see behind the public persona and realise that the famous person is just like us – and yet the aura of fame remains. Here we have Elvis when he was ostensibly unexceptional – before he was famous – but he's

reconstructed because he became famous. History calls eerily from over the years and we call back. There's a kinship here with Braas, for this is a model of sorts, and with how Stephen Shore makes us think about what is significant and why. There's also a curious parallel with Sternfeld: to come across a stranded elephant or an unrecognised Elvis are both disruptions which suggest that the normal has more range and potential than we expect.

For me, then, 'Magical Surfaces' is something of a missed opportunity to use Parasol Unit's impressive space for a fuller showing of just those four artists. Yet it's a fascinating exhibition, and much of it uncannily so.

– [Paul Carey-Kent](#)

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography continues at Parasol Unit until 19 June 2016



Now Showing: Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Emily Steer, *Elephant Magazine*, 27 April 2016, <http://www.elephantmag.com/now-showing-magical-surfaces-uncanny-contemporary-photography/>

Now Showing: Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Text by Emily Steer

The uncanny—something which is both familiar and unfamiliar, which sits on a line between reality and imagination—is the focus of Parasol Unit’s current exhibition *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography*. And what better way to explore this subject, than via that unreliable truth-teller, the camera.

Though not consciously connected at the time, the first instances of photographic manipulation (happening not long after the first known photograph in 1826) occurred around the year that the idea of the uncanny was considered, in 1835, in the work of German philosopher Friedrich Schelling. Manipulation is a repeated theme in this exhibition, and the seven displayed photographers have mastered the qualities of their craft that make the uncanny possible: digital and analogue manipulation, and photographic staging.

In many of the works it is the assumed reality of the content that plays tricks, the images having been created from scratch using computer technology—Julie Monaco and Jörg Sasse are fantastic examples—and many also hint at leaps between time—Elvis is back in the building, resurrected in the work of David Claerbout. In other images it is the very surface of the photograph that appears to defy its medium, Elger Esser’s C-prints appearing confusingly Turner-esque.

What is especially exciting about this exhibition is that the exploration of the uncanny extends beyond the borders of each individual image. It can also be found in the selection of work, where forms and compositions seem to move from one image to the next. Apparently disconnected images mirror a disconcerting amount of visual information from image to image, it is as though these independent works had been created with one another in mind.

As a final touch, all of these photographs are staggeringly beautiful; the beguiling pull of the uncanny explored to full effect.

'Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography' is showing at Parasol Unit until 19 June 2016

Uncanny valleys: sinister landscapes from around the world – in pictures

The Guardian, 28 April 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/apr/28/magical-surfaces-the-uncanny-in-contemporary-photography>

Photography

Uncanny valleys: sinister landscapes from around the world – in pictures

A group of disparate artists have all found something eerie and unknowable in apparently benign landscapes – even when the sun is shining

Thursday 28 April 2016 07.00 BST

Sonja Braas Firestorm, from the series The Quiet of Dissolution, 2008



For its new exhibition, the Parasol unit gallery has collected together artists who uncover the weirdness beating at the heart of placid landscapes• [Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography](#) is at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, London, until 19 June 2016

Photograph: Sonja Braas, Fabian & Claude Walter Gallery



Stephen Shore
U.S. 97, South of
Klamath Falls,
Oregon, July 21,
1973

Stephen Shore is known for his road trips across America, documenting the epic spaces – and sometimes epic banality – of the US

Photograph: Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery

Joel Sternfeld Virginia, December 1978

Using an 8 x 10 format camera, Joel Sternfeld creates arch, morbid documentary photos in America and elsewhere

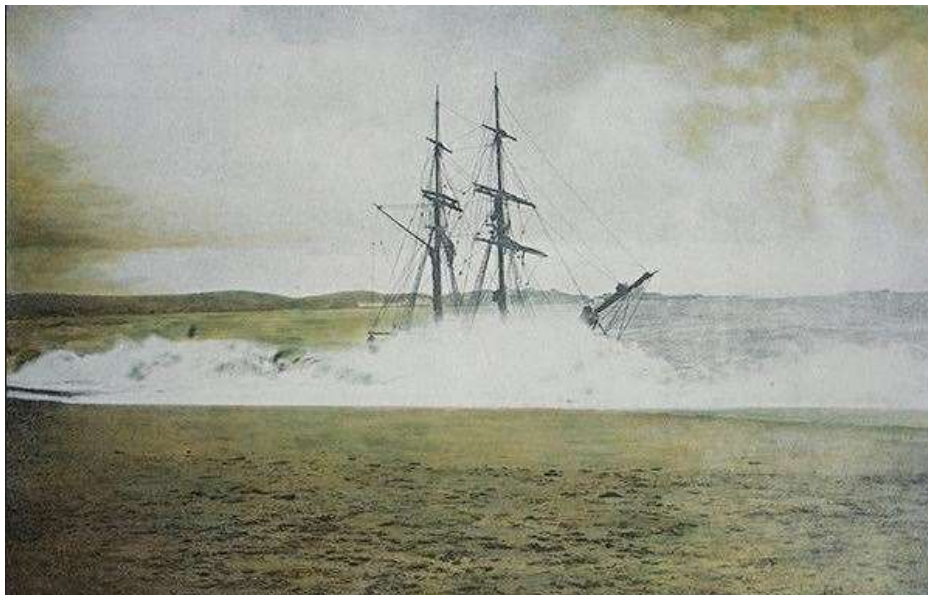
Photograph: Joel Sternfeld, Luhring Augustine



Julie Monaco cs 02

Julie Monaco initially appears to be taking photos amid turbulent landscapes, but she's actually safe and dry indoors, creating them using computer algorithms

Photograph: Julie Monaco



Elger Esser 33 Saint-Jean-de- Luz 2008

Like Sternfeld and Shore, Elger Esser also goes on meandering journeys with his camera – including Europe, creating images like this French seascape

Photograph: Elger Esser



Joel Sternfeld
Exhausted
Renegade Elephant,
Woodland,
Washington, June
1979

Another work from Sternfeld's American Prospects series, after the police have caught up with an elephant on the run – his photos frequently show humanity slightly at odds with nature

Photograph: Joel Sternfeld, Luhring Augustine



Elger Esser Santa
Caterina II

A typically peaceful work from Esser, which hints at classic Dutch landscape painting

Photograph: Elger Esser

Stephen Shore Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, July 13, 1974

Shore was one of the first photographers working in colour to be acclaimed by the art world, predating the likes of Andreas Gursky and Martin Parr

Photograph: Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery



Jörg Sasse

2729, 2012 German artist Jörg Sasse creates manipulations of existing images by scanning them, digitally altering them, and then making new negatives to develop from – resulting in images that play with reality

Photograph: Jörg Sasse, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



Julie Monaco MC 01.05, 2006

A swirling cloudscape emerges from another of Monaco's digital interventions

Photograph: Julie Monaco



Stephen Shore Bellevue, Alberta, August 21 1974

Shore finds a little church at the edge of the Canadian Rockies – a long way from Warhol's Factory, where he first started his career

Photograph: Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery



Jörg Sasse

1563, 2007 Another of Sasse's digitally altered images – all of which are numbered in a four-digit code, a filing system for his computer

Photograph: Jörg Sasse, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



Aesthetica

5 To See This Weekend

Aesthetica Magazine, 29 April 2016, <http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/5-see-weekend-51-6/>

3. *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography*, **Parasol Unit**, London
Since its first major interpretation in 1835 by German philosopher Friedrich Schelling, and again by Sigmund Freud in his influential essay (*The Uncanny*, 1919), the uncanny has featured prominently in the works of writers, philosophers, artists and others. A familiar topic in the art world, London's Parasol Unit revisits the theme through the projects of seven artists who use and manipulate the medium of photography. Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld invite audiences to marvel at the ambiguous nature of the uncanny across a spectrum of striking pieces.



Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Ananda Pellerin, Time Out London, May 2016, <http://www.timeout.com/london/art/magical-surfaces-the-uncanny-in-contemporary-photography>

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Art **FREE**



TIME OUT SAYS

3 out of 5 stars

Like its lofty cousin the ‘sublime’, the ‘uncanny’ is difficult to describe – and many great minds have tried. Sigmund Freud was one of them. In his 1919 essay ‘Das Unheimliche’, he famously calls the uncanny a thing that is at once familiar and unfamiliar, with this dissonance stirring up unease in the viewer. A common modern example is the revulsion people feel when they encounter a humanoid robot: it is almost a person, but not quite; your instincts kick into gear and tell you to keep watch. Because of its powerful effect on mind and body, the uncanny offers a deep well for artists looking to stir up complex sensations.

Most of the work in this show is either from the past ten years or from the 1970s. A handful of photographers are represented, and there is a transfixing HD animation by David Claerbout, ‘KING (after Alfred Wertheimer’s 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)’ (2015-16), which slowly zooms in and out of a down-south domestic scene featuring a man who looks like Elvis, but isn’t.

Many of the recent works rely on confusion of scale for their effect – you just can’t tell how big or small the scene you’re looking at is. Some of the older photos, by Joel Sternfeld, capture nearly-normal American pastoral scenes. In ‘McLean, Virginia, December 1987’, a fire fighter looks to be choosing a pumpkin from a roadside stand in the foreground, as a giant farmhouse blazes away behind them. In another image, cars are stopped along an anonymous stretch of countryside road; while the feathered hair and bellbottoms on the men are nothing special for 1979, the elephant collapsed beside them definitely is (‘Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, June 1979’). Is any of this uncanny? Maybe.

There’s nothing wrong with any of the photographs presented here, but what is lacking is a sense of ambition in the decision to bring these specific works together. The lack of play misses out on all the possibilities that this unsettling sensation should afford. Sadly, it leaves one with a feeling all too familiar.

BY: ANANDA PELLERIN

Tique

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Karolien Chromiak, *Tique Art Paper*, May 2016, <http://www.tique-paper.com/exhibitions/magical-surfaces-uncanny-contemporary-photography/>



Exhibition *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography*

Artist(s) Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld.

Venue Parasol, unit foundation for contemporary art

As early as 1835, the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling wrote of “das Unheimliche”, the uncanny, as ‘everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible’. Years later, Sigmund Freud elaborated on what Schelling and others had thought about this ‘peculiar quality’, but he also ‘felt impelled’ to investigate it in relation to aesthetics. In his influential essay ‘The “Uncanny”’, 1919, Freud saw there was a common thread to everything that arouses our sense of the uncanny: it ‘is that class of terrifying which leads back to

something long known to us, once very familiar'. Although individual responses are complex and subjective, what we experience as uncanny is that which gives us a feeling of unease when something seems both familiar and unfamiliar, when some quality effaces the distinction between the imagined and the real.

The *Magical Surfaces* title of this exhibition derives from the thoughts of Vilém Flusser who, in his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 1983, wrote of photographic images as 'significant surfaces' and of 'the magical nature of images'. We are always intrigued when an apparently straightforward image suddenly takes on an ambiguous, *uncanny*, quality as our mind grasps, as Ernst Jentsch wrote in 1906, its 'intellectual uncertainty'.

The mastery each of the exhibiting artists has over their own process of manipulating the photographic image invites us to marvel at the many ways the uncanny can occur in photographic works. Essentially exploring time in his work, David Claerbout does indeed appear to do magic by bringing a pre-stardom Elvis Presley intimately back to life in three- dimensions by digitally reconstructing him from a 1950s black-and-white photograph. Julie Monaco's often hyper-real and dramatically turbulent scenes appear at first to be images of nature, but in fact are created entirely on her computer using fractal algorithmic software. An absence of presence is discernible in the apparently realistic images created by Jörg Sasse, one of the first artists to use computer technology as his brush and canvas. Both he and Elger Esser studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Prof. Bernd Becher, who together with his wife Hilla is renowned for their remarkable photographs of industrial buildings. Esser, too, deals with time and memory in his serenely lit and composed land- and seascapes that seem at once to be both familiar and unfamiliar.

Sonja Braas works entirely in analogue, sometimes from ready-made sources, often by artificially creating landscapes or by building models which she then photographs, rather than directly photographing actual nature. Among other things, her work questions what is real and what is unreal in any image. In the 1970s, both Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld travelled independently across the USA, taking what are evocatively revealing photographs of the time and place. Using Kodachrome film and 35-mm cameras, they managed to capture an atmosphere that is almost palpably uncanny. Their work continues to inspire subsequent generations of artists to continue innovating with photography. As Sternfeld says: 'Photography has always been capable of manipulation. [...] any time you put a frame to the world, it's an intervention [...] photographs have always been authored.'



London's Most Talked About Exhibitions

Tabish Khan, *The Londonist*, 3 May 2016, <http://londonist.com/2016/05/warhol-to-yves-klein-london-s-most-talked-about-exhibitions>

Warhol To Yves Klein: London's Most Talked About Exhibitions

BY TABISH KHAN

[Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography](#)

A mixture of surreal and stunning photography as photo-manipulation is explored in this diverse exhibition. We get to see a dehydrated elephant in the middle of a road and a cityscape that appears to be on fire. A two-floor exhibition filled with fantastic photography. **Until 19 June, free.**

Londonist Rating: ★★★★★☆



The Hidden Truth of Photography

Jacopo Nuvolari, *Internazionale*, 4 May 2016,

<http://www.internazionale.it/foto/2016/05/04/magical-surfaces-foto>



The Hidden Truth of Photography

"It said unheimlich all that might remain secret, hidden, and that instead surfaced". So the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling in 1835 defines a difficult feeling to describe, anticipating by a few years the thought of Sigmund Freud on the uncanny.

Fear, disorientation, stupor: Das Unheimliche (uncanny, in English) for Freud is something familiar but at the same time a stranger who stirs in us all confusing feelings that, depending on the individual response, they can take more or less negative shades.

With the exhibition *Magical surfaces: the uncanny in contemporary photography*, organized by the Parasol Unit Foundation in London (until 19 June), the curators wanted to explore the uncanny through the works of seven authors: Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld.

Each of these artists have manipulated the photographic image by interpreting differently and staff the concept of the uncanny. David Claerbout revive an Elvis still not known with an animation made in 3d digitally reconstructing an image of 1956. While Julie Monaco landscapes and Sonja Braas may seem like photographs taken in the traditional way but are instead the product of computer processing or start at artificial reconstructions of the models. Older generations, Shore and Sternfeld, told the uncanny with more traditional means, Kodachrome films and film cameras, and managed to seize atmospheres that still inspire those who confronts the art of photography.



The Hidden Truth of Photography

Jacopo Nuvolari, *Internazionale*, 4 May 2016,

<http://www.internazionale.it/foto/2016/05/04/magical-surfaces-foto>



Le verità nascoste della fotografia

“È detto *unheimlich* tutto ciò che potrebbe restare segreto, nascosto, e che è invece affiorato”. Così il filosofo tedesco Friedrich Schelling definisce nel 1835 un sentimento difficile da descrivere, anticipando di qualche anno la riflessione di Sigmund Freud sul perturbante.

Paura, spaesamento, stupore: *Das Unheimliche* (*uncanny*, in inglese) per Freud è qualcosa di familiare ma allo stesso tempo estraneo che suscita in tutti noi sensazioni di confusione che, a seconda della risposta individuale, possono assumere sfumature più o meno negative.

Con la mostra *Magical surfaces: the uncanny in contemporary photography*, organizzata dalla fondazione Parasol Unit di Londra (fino al 19 giugno), i curatori hanno voluto esplorare il perturbante attraverso le opere di sette autori: Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore e Joel Sternfeld.

Ognuno di questi artisti hanno manipolato l'immagine fotografica interpretando in maniera diversa e personale il concetto di perturbante. David Claerbout riporta in vita un Elvis ancora non famoso con un'animazione in 3d fatta ricostruendo digitalmente una foto del 1956. Mentre i paesaggi di Julie Monaco e Sonja Braas potrebbero sembrare foto realizzate in maniera tradizionale ma sono invece il prodotto di elaborazioni al computer o partono da ricostruzioni artificiali con dei modellini. Le vecchie generazioni, Sternfeld e Shore, hanno raccontato il perturbante con mezzi più tradizionali, pellicole Kodachrome e fotocamere analogiche, e sono riusciti a cogliere atmosfere che ancora oggi ispirano chi si confronta con l'arte fotografica.

- FOTOGRAFIA

Uncanny photography at Parasol unit, tree peeing and porn at the National Gallery, plus the rest of this week's top London shows

Louisa Buck, *The Art Newspaper*, 14 May 2016,

http://theartnewspaper.com/comment/blogs/Luisa_Buck_Blog/uncanny-photography-at-parasol-unit-tree-peeing-and-porn-at-the-national-gallery-plus-the-rest-of-th/



Joel Sternfeld, *McLean*, Virginia, December 1978 (printed 2003). © Joel Sternfeld. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York and Zabłudowicz Collection

Magical Surfaces: the Uncanny in Contemporary Photography, Parasol Unit (until 19 June)

The Freudian notion of the “uncanny”—which the great man described in 1919 as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar”—is now a well stomped-upon creative territory, especially in the realm of photography. But this generation-spanning seven-artist show confirms that even in our jaded post-Freudian image-overloaded era, we can still be treated to a disquietingly *unheimlich* frisson.

All-American 1970s normality is subtly and sometimes dramatically subverted in the subconscious tweaks provided by Joel Sternfeld’s crisply deadpan and tragicomic real-life scenarios, or in the eerily empty Americana vistas of the artist-photographer Stephen Shore. But by far the most chilling clash of familiar/unfamiliar comes from David Claerbout’s extraordinary 2015 reconstruction of a 3D Elvis, digitally conjured out of a vintage photo showing the young, pre-fame King, wearing just a pair of shorts and relaxing at home with friends and family. Not only does the resulting animation flesh out the figures by disquietingly placing them in real space, but the way in which the camera also intimately and excruciatingly scrutinizes every inch of this most famous of bodies causes one’s own flesh to creep in sympathy.

Art Tour / East London Galleries, Spring 2016

Manu Buttiglione, **Droste**, 17 May 2016, <http://www.drosteeffectmag.com/art-tour-east-london-galleries-spring-2016/>

Art Tour | East London Galleries, Spring 2016



'Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography'. Installation view at Parasol unit, 2016. Photography: Jack Hems. Courtesy of Parasol unit.

A logo on a small sign on the wall, a heavy door and a noisy buzzer. Then a few steps, before entering a warehouse space illuminated with neon lights, all walls re-painted in a bright white, in contrast with a glossy grey floor. Since the beginning of the 1990s this

Parasol unit

foundation for contemporary art

14 Wharf Road | London | N1 7RW

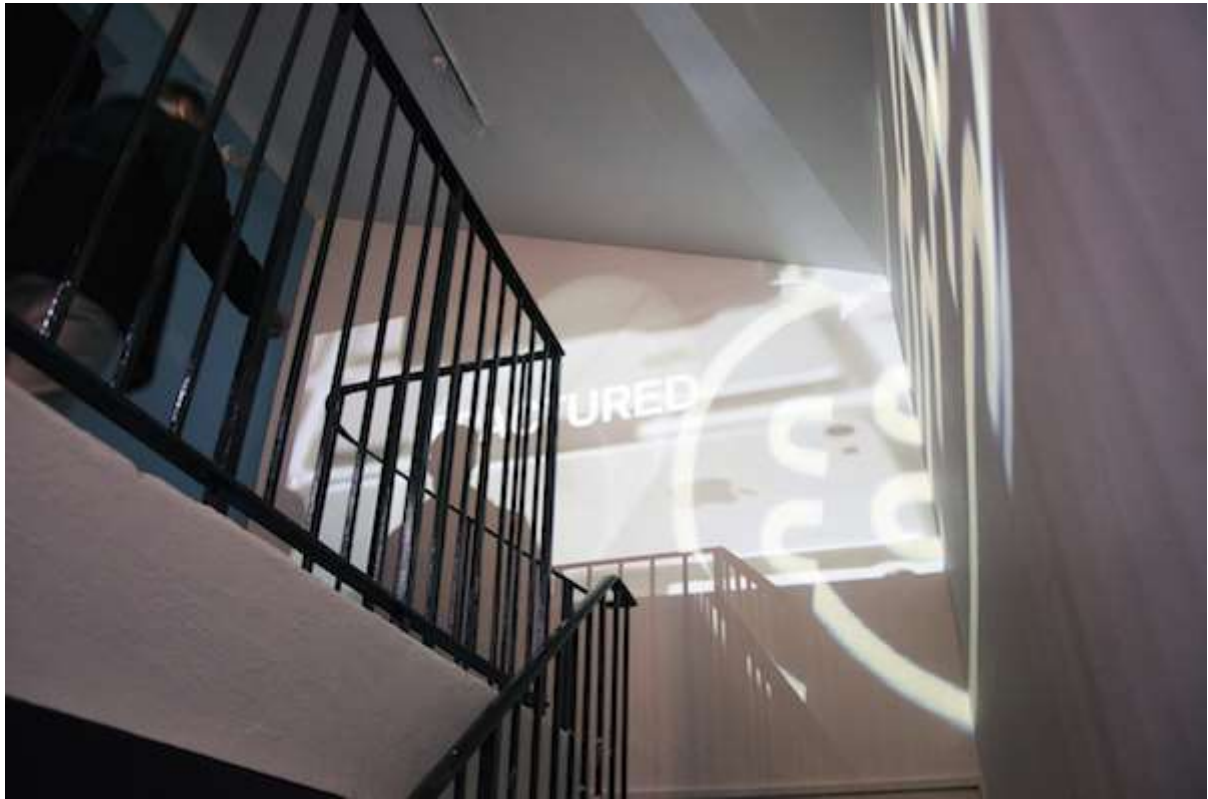
image has been strongly impressed in the imagination of all gallery-goers. We can clearly identify this aesthetic, developed within the abandoned manufacturing buildings of the London's East End, where it was introduced a few decades ago, by looking at the art scene from the other side of the Atlantic.



Charles Mayton, installation view at Campoli Presti, London, through 22 May

What has happened since then? As all the urban makeovers, this was just the beginning of a tale of transformations, where creative motivations must face sooner or later the complex and delicate processes behind the City. After the roaring years between the end of the 1990s and the dawn of the new millennium, the number of art venues increased unrestrained, leaving less and less space for experimentation and enterprising spirit. Gentrification and fast rising prices did the rest, so that, by the beginning of the new decade, London witnessed a real exodus of galleries from the East.

It has been quite shocking to hear the news that Matt's Gallery, one of the pioneer and most influential spaces in the area, has shut its doors to relocate South. But apparently the end of this season is far away to come, considering the even now remarkable concentration of galleries and the charm that it continues to hold on the contemporary art scene. Just during these very last weeks, with renovated energies Breese Little and Kunstraum have moved across inaugurating new venues respectively in Cambridge Heat Road and Shoreditch, while at the beginning of this month we have welcomed Limone, a new artist run space in Homerton.



Bad Infinity 2.0, installation view at xero.kline.coma, through 22 May

With a bittersweet feeling but not without expectations, we have then taken a long art tour, visiting most of the spaces gathered around East London; among the highlights of the area, we recommend *Paper, Publication, Performance* at Lychee One, an exhibition of artist books and works on paper, culminating in this final week, entirely devoted to performances. This is the last week also for *Bad Infinity 2.0* at xero, kline & coma, an intangible assault to the gallery space by Luke Pendrell and James Trafford, who explored the hybrid temporality of GIF images. Worthy of attention is also Maria Eichhorn's solo show at Chisenhale, who has sent the gallery's staff on unexpected leave for *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, as part of her research on contemporary labour conditions.

Photography-lovers will enjoy *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography* – curated by Ziba Ardan – featuring a selection of artworks by Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore, and Joel Sternfeld – that questions the notions of reality and fiction of photographic images. Finally – not to be missed – Laura Bartlett's group show *Under a Falling Sky*, featuring works by John Divola, Cyprien Gaillard, Beatrice Gibson, Michail Pargelis, and Daniel Turner, as well as the exuberant solo show by Małgorzata Markiewicz *Can I make you feel bad?* at l'étrangère.

this is tomorrow

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Aris Kourkoumelis, **this is tomorrow**, 23 May 2016,

<http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/magical-surfaces-the-uncanny-in-contemporary-photography>

The first thing that strikes you about ‘Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography’ is the beauty of the vast landscapes that hang along the walls of Parasol unit’s ground floor gallery. Devoid of human presence and of any sense of scale, the photographs are so large and aesthetically powerful that they instantly encompass you and pull you in.

Yet under closer inspection some of them are not quite right. Julie Monaco’s work echoes Ansel Adams’s towering mountains. Look closely and you will realise that her landscapes are actually digitally generated images, made using fractal algorithms, of scenes that never existed. Similarly, Jörg Sasse has created apparently realistic sweeping vistas entirely using computer technology. False readings and interpretations prove intriguing – they remind us how easily photography can lie. But is there an element of the ‘uncanny’ in these otherwise sublime images as the exhibition title suggests?

In his 1919 seminal essay on the uncanny, Sigmund Freud explores two short stories written by E.T. A. Hoffman. In both texts, Freud detects, as only he would, the fear of castration, but he also suggests that a feeling of dread is evoked because something that was once homely and familiar has been made strange and unfamiliar. That we feel tricked and confused while discovering the true origins of Monaco and Sasse’s work can be in little doubt, but the view that their technology is unfamiliar to us would take almost no account of the digital age we live in. Our awareness of image manipulation is not the only thing, however, that distances their work from the notion of the uncanny, for any feeling of uncertainty caused by the puzzle of the unreal-looking photographs, evaporates after the mystery of their creation is solved.

Sonja Braas’ work on display also fits this description, although instead of working digitally, she photographs constructed sets that resemble the natural world. Her ‘Firestorm’ (2008) however, is an exception: it introduces an element of threat and calamity by depicting a cityscape on a calm unclouded night being approached by a blazing fire from behind. This unsettling feeling that something tumultuous is simmering beneath the serenity of the image is equally sensed in Elger Esser’s photographs on the opposite wall. Despite the lyricism of his ‘Italian’ landscapes, or perhaps because of it, there is something eerie about his images as if they have successfully captured the strange lull before the storm.

The show's overall effect moves away from dramatic to more quiet and quotidian as one approaches the upstairs rooms and the works of Joel Sternfeld and Stephen Shore. Both artists are known for documenting the American vernacular landscape using an expressionless approach, warm tones and a compositional framing which allows them to take surreal photographs that appear simultaneously commonplace and arresting, banal and grandiose. When Rosalind Krauss studies surrealism - and in particular Hans Bellmer's disturbing photographs of dolls - through Freud's lens, she is underscoring the fact that a haunting end result is a necessary ingredient in triggering that metaphysical shudder of the uncanny. Yet the ruptures of contemporary life in Shore and Sternfeld's work are less about discomfort and more about quirky humour and playfulness. That Sternfeld chose to capture a group of fire-fighters extinguishing a blaze while one of them is ironically shopping for pumpkins speaks volumes about his mischievous spirit, and yet makes the lack of uncanniness further apparent.

If such works may be accused of sabotaging the exhibition's own intent, arguably it is the last room that saves the day. In it, a 10-minute video by David Claerbout plays on a loop bringing Elvis Presley back from the grave. Using a snapshot of Elvis taken before he hit the big time, Claerbout has recreated Elvis' body in a video in which the camera rotates around him at an incredible close-up scale. The extreme awkwardness experienced by viewing Elvis' bare skin, soft hair and sweat is triggered by the invitation to scrutinise in such intimacy a figure famously surrounded by mystery. It is also kindled by the eerie way a dead person appears so alive, calling to mind the importance of waxworks, automata and dolls in Freud's examination of the uncanny. 'KING' (2015-16), which is neither reality nor imaginative invention, neither animation nor in-animation, hits the spot of the paradoxical nature of the uncanny: the familiar and the unfamiliar at once.

It would take another show to thoroughly map photography's relationship to the body and the uncanny. For now, 'Magical Surfaces' predominantly explores the notion's expression through landscapes. By what criteria the works might be deemed uncanny is anyone's guess, but uncertainty, confusion and dilemma are indeed synonymous with that nagging feeling of discomfort.



Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Angela Pippo, Curating the Contemporary, 23 May 2016,

<https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2016/05/23/magical-surfaces-the-uncanny-in-contemporary-photography/>

When in 1919 Freud developed the concept of the 'uncanny', he dedicated a long part of his dissertation to clarifying the etymology of the term and its translation from the German 'Das Unheimliche' into other various languages. The numerous acceptations of the original German word and the impossibility of finding a comprehensive definition brought Freud to classify different types of the 'uncanny' and leave the matter open to further specifications.

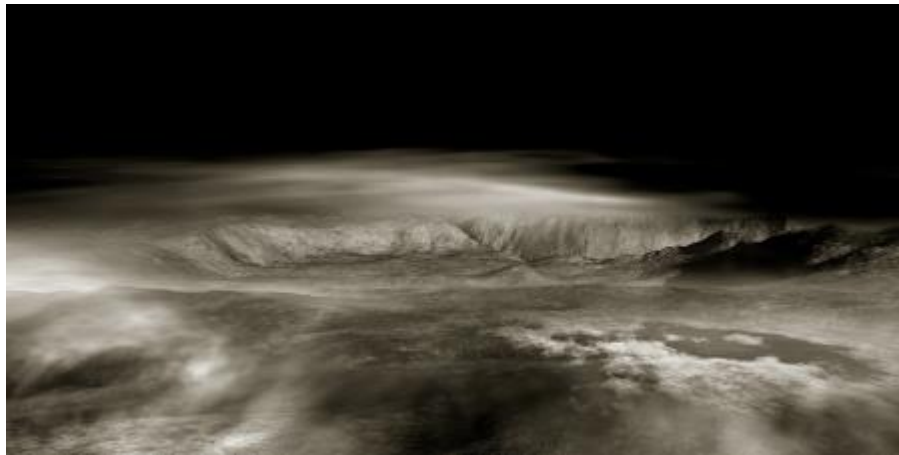
The variety of shapes that the term can take, linguistically and conceptually, makes the 'uncanny' an enigmatic 'label', subject to personal interpretation and therefore not easy to apply. The relation to the term 'uncanny' in *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography* at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art responds more to the intention of proposing a catchy expression than of creating a systematic reference. The curator made use of the concept as an indistinctive frame which contains very different outcomes. The result is an exhibition that, as a complex system of theoretical allusions, touches upon many other themes.



Sonja Braas, *You Are Here #5* (1999)

The show aims to cause an interference with the common perceptions and, placing the viewers in the position of undertaking an emotional experience, it draws a connection to the philosophy of the photographic 'spectator' that was defined by Roland Barthes in his essay *Camera Lucida*. In 1980 the French philosopher formulated a meaningful definition of that effect that at Parasol unit is called 'uncanny' and in his system is named 'punctum'. Barthes refers to the ways viewers develop an interest in a particular image, and place the 'studium', "that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste"^[i], in contrast to the 'punctum'. The 'punctum' represents what makes a picture poignant to someone, "that accident which pricks me", a detail that "attracts or distresses me"^[ii], in Barthes's words. Even though for the French critic the 'punctum' in an image is what creates a very personal and, at first, unconscious or unpredictable reaction in the viewer, the selection at Parasol unit presents a wide array of 'punctum' insofar as it doesn't seek a sensational or surprising effect (what Barthes calls 'shock') but it performs its disturbance making use of discreet details.

A reference to Bernd and Hilla Becher and their philosophy of a detached and objective vision is present in many authors exhibited at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art. Elger Esser and Jörg Sasse studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Bernd Becher. At the Londoner foundation they show images where soundless landscapes convey a strong sense of alienation and feeling of the sublime.



Julie Monaco, MC 01.05 (2006)

Belonging to an older generation of photographers the Americans Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld employ different techniques to provide a personal vision on the environment we live in. They are both pioneers in colour photography and the brightness of their images' tones help their pictures to access an almost surreal dimension.

The inclusion of an artist like Julia Monaco, whose work is entirely created digitally through a fractal algorithmic software, raises questions about the legitimacy of reading images produced without a physical reference to reality using the same theoretical and semiotic tools formulated to comment on analogue photography.

The continuity between the pictures hung on the walls is interrupted by two video installations by the multi-media artist David Claerbout. Making use of technology he explores the tridimensional dimension represented on the two-dimensional photographic surface. The video *King* (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named *Elvis Presley*) visually brings the viewers to close proximity to Elvis's semi-naked body. The way the gaze slides on Elvis's skin and revolves around his body is highly unsettling, not just because the spectators are required to enter someone's private-ness but also because they can navigate in an almost tactile way the same space occupied by a dead legend.



Stephen Shore, Badlands National Monument, South Dakota, July 14 1973 (1973), printed 2014



Jörg Sasse, 2729 (2012)

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography is on until 19 June 2016 at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art.

Angela Pippo

Angela Pippo is a curator based in London. She completed her MA in History of Art in 2013 in Milan and she is currently attending the MA Curating the Contemporary at London Metropolitan University and Whitechapel Gallery. She collaborated as researcher and grant recipient with international institutions such as the Antonio Ratti Foundation (Como, Italy) and the Institute of Contemporary Art (Sofia, Bulgaria). Her past curatorial experiences include: Concrete Matters, 3 – 19 March 2016, Bank Space Gallery, 59 – 63 Whitechapel High Street, London. Through The City, February 2016 – February 2017, The Blietheale Health Centre, Bethnal Green, London. 217 Stangers/ Hao Xu, 8 May 2014, the Anatomy Museum, King's College, London (curated by 15Curators Collective)

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[i] Barthes R. (1993), *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage Book

[ii] Barthes R. (1993), *Camera Lucida*, p. 27

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

Dr. Kostas Prapoglou, THE SEEN, 2 June 2016, <http://theseenjournal.org/art-seen-international/magical-surfaces-uncanny-contemporary-photography-parasol-unit-london/>



Magical Surfaces, Installation View. Photo: Jack Hems

MAGICAL SURFACES: THE UNCANNY IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY // PARASOL UNIT, LONDON

By Dr. Kostas Prapoglou

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography is the new exhibition at Parasol Unit Foundation For Contemporary Art, featuring the works of seven photographers belonging to two different generations. Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld were both born in the 1940s whereas Jörg Sasse, Elger Esser, Sonja Braas, David Claerbout and Julie Monaco were all born between the 1960s and 70s.

Curated by Parasol Unit Founder/Director Ziba Ardalan, the exhibition receives its inspiration from 'The Uncanny', an essay by Freud written in 1919, which was based on previous philosophical and psychological explorations by influential thinkers such as German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854). This text elucidates the hypostasis of events once known to the subconscious mind and now introduced to conscious reality through undefined and uncategorized processes, it is this that triggers emotions of uncertainty and unease. These unsettling occurrences correspond to the ambiguous interpretation of the works on view, as they are balancing esoteric assessments and outer influences.

The exhibition literature highlights the importance of Vilém Flusser's work, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), in the construction of the conceptual narrative of the show. According to Vilém, the magical properties of photographs mediate a compact source of information emerging through its impact on the viewer's psyche. The process of decoding each image brings the viewer closer to a state of consciousness, rediscovering aspects of reality imbued within concealed emotions.



Stephen Shore, U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973, printed 2002

Using Kodachrome film and 35-mm cameras back in the 1970s, both Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld travelled independently across the United States, capturing images and pronouncing the character of their time as well as the uniqueness of each chosen locus. Always taking into consideration the vital role of the landscape, both photographers place emphasis on aspects of the quotidian and the mundane while simultaneously transmitting an eerie and spectral quintessence challenging the viewer's perception of reality.



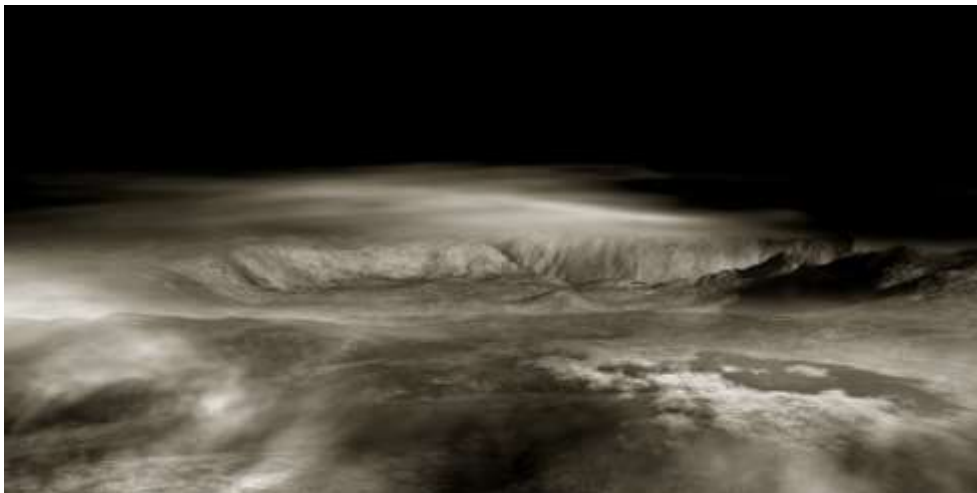
Elger Esser, 33 Saint-Jean-de-Luz, 2008

Jörg Sasse's images embrace notions of presence and absence through realistic narratives. While Elger Esser, a fellow student of Sasse's at Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, conveys ideas of time and memory by utilizing a specific visual vocabulary which enhances his selected topographies with a sepia tone and a warm, antique feeling. On the other hand, Sonja Braas puts the viewer's eye to the test through her distinctive constructions of artificial habitats and landscapes, which she masterfully employs as settings for her photographs. *Firestorm* from the *Quite of Dissolution* series (2008), *Foroes #1* (2002) and *You Are Here #5* (1999) are superb examples of her fascination with natural phenomena, diverse terrains and the presence of human intervention.



David Claerbout, *KING* (2015-2016).

David Claerbout's works on view focus' more directly on a human occurrence with a playful approach. In *KING* (2015-2016), named after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young Elvis Presley, a single channel 10-minute silent HD animation on video projection, the artist reconstructs a 1950s image featuring singer Elvis Presley, captured during an unexpected and unusual moment. Claerbout also presents another, more surreal, single channel HD video projection, entitled *Highway Wreck (suite)*, 2013-2016, and a photograph zoomed in on a famous person's back for which the viewer is free to guess who it belongs to (Elvis' Back, 2016).



Julie Monaco, *MC_01.05_2006*

Julie Monaco's practice involves fractal algorithmic software that renders hyperreal environments inspired by natural phenomena. What appears to be extraordinary images of dramatic weather conditions are actually the product of painstaking computer processing. *MC_01/05* (2006) and *cs_02/4* (2005) are fascinating samples of Monaco's modus operandi fabricating a bird's eye view of stunning landscapes and cloudscares. *Magical Surfaces* is a journey through the metaphors of life and human existence, a survey of emotions and experiences as they gradually unfold throughout our personal and interpersonal trajectories. With deep respect towards the developing and transitioning idiosyncrasy of the viewer, each photographer demonstrates their own universe of creative practice, a diverse lexicon of imagery that stimulates our memory, emotions and desires.

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography at Parasol Unit London runs through June 19, 2016.

Dr. Kostas Prapoglou is an archaeologist-architect, contemporary art writer, critic and curator based in London, UK and Athens, Greece.



TOP 10 TO SEE – Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography

POSTmatter, 3 June 2016, <http://postmatter.com/#/currents/top-10-to-see-4>

TOP 10 TO SEE by POSTmatter Editors | June 3, 2016

GET TO KNOW THE POSTMATTER PICK OF ESSENTIAL EXHIBITIONS AS THE SUMMER GETS UNDERWAY.



Parasol Unit, London. 13th April – 19th June 2016.

In his 1919 essay Freud defined the uncanny as 'that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar'. Through photography *Magical Surfaces* captures this almost indecipherable sense of unease and familiarity, and the chilling moments where the uncanny seeps into everyday life. Photography indeed seems to be the ideal vehicle for picturing the uncanny: As a form it can represent real life and yet as an isolated image in a frame, distorted by the artist's own eyes, it becomes unreal and is easily manipulated. The exhibition brings together a fantastic selection of work, which take photography beyond the confines of its discipline, leaving the viewer somewhere between unsettled and enchanted.

Elvis lives! A new show at Parasol unit explores the role of the uncanny in contemporary photography

Giuseppe Marasco, East End Review, June 2016, <http://hackneycitizen.co.uk/2016/06/07/magical-surfaces-uncanny-contemporary-photography-parasol-unit-review/>



10 ART



L. Sonja Brass, *Fivestorm*, from the series *The Quiet of Dissolution*
R. David Claerbout, *KING* (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)

Elvis lives!

A new show at Parasol Unit explores the role of the uncanny in contemporary photography

GIUSEPPE MARASCO

In this group show at Parasol Unit, photography is shown to be no longer limited by a lens. The images in *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography* stray into realms of the sublime, imagination and human projections of the infinite.

David Claerbout takes historical photographs and brings the subjects back to life using three-dimensional digital reconstruction. The results of that reconstruction are then printed as conventional two-dimensional photographs.

A pre-stardom Elvis Presley is perhaps his greatest 'magic trick'. Every detail of the King, including skin tone and the sweat on his brow, was rendered from a 1950s black and white photograph.

This uncanny valley Franken-Elvis is disturbing. What is more real, if there is more information in the reconstruction than in the original photograph?

How the structure of meteorological forces and 'patterns' of waves and winds are embodied and perceived challenges our sense of ownership over nature, something which dates back to the

Romantic period. Julie Monaco uses algorithmic software to create dramatic photographs of weather phenomena that blur the lines between nature, art, photography and abstraction.

The human hand is intentionally detectable in the work of Sonja Brass, who works entirely in analogue.

Brass uses ready-made sources, artificially creates landscapes or builds models, which she then photographs, rather than photographing actual nature. Her work questions what is real and what is unreal in any image.

Stephen Shore's empty scenes of America evoke a lost civilisation. He and fellow photographer Joel Sternfeld travelled independently across the USA, taking what are evocatively revealing photographs of the time and place, capturing an atmosphere almost palpably uncanny.

As a traveller, any new landscape you enter is uncanny, as traces accumulate and subtly inform and betray

intelligences and choices that seem alien. All photography is uncanny as a result of the artist's presence and desire to

create. But do we trust this unknown other, and what is it that we are being pushed into? *Magical Surfaces* attempts to provide an answer.

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography
Until 19 June
Parasol Unit, 14 Wharf Road, N1 7RW
parasol-unit.org

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography, Parasol unit – art review

Giuseppe Marasco, **East End Review**, 7 June 2016,

<https://www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2016/06/07/magical-surfaces-uncanny-contemporary-photography-parasol-unit-review/>

[Art & Design](#) / 7 June, 2016

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography, Parasol Unit – art review

The King is brought back to life in a new exhibition at the Parasol Unit that explores the limits of the photographer's lens

[Giuseppe Marasco](#)



'King' by David Claerbout, after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley

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‘Firestorm’ by Sonja Braas from the series The Quiet of Dissolution

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As a traveller, any new landscape you enter is uncanny, as traces accumulate and subtly inform and betray intelligences and choices that seem alien.

All photography is uncanny as a result of the artist’s presence and desire to create. But do we trust this unknown other, and what is it that we are being pushed into? Magical Surfaces attempts to provide an answer.

Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography is at Parasol Unit, 14 Wharf Road, N1 7RW until 19 June
parasol-unit.org



Magical Surfaces – Art Exhibition

Jacopo Nuvolari, 1883 Magazine, 9 June 2016, <http://www.1883magazine.com/art-exhibitions/art-exhibition/magical-surfaces>

MAGICAL SURFACES

ART EXHIBITION



Sonja Braas, Firestorm
From The Quiet of Dissolution series
2008
Courtesy of the artist and Fabian & Claude Walter
Gallery, Zurich

A recurring topic in the psychoanalytic literature, the Uncanny, has long been subject to an irresistible fascination within the art world – thus becoming a “curatorial leitmotif” for museums and galleries worldwide. Despite its cultural centrality and significance, however, the idea has rarely been examined with regard to the photographic medium.

Parasol unit bridges this gap with *Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny In Contemporary Photography*, a group show that brings together works devised over the past four decades by Sonja Braas, David Claerbout, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco, Jörg Sasse, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld. Deriving its title from Vilem Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, in which the Czech author elaborates on the "magical power of images", the exhibition finds its conceptual and aesthetic premise in Romantic Idealism (German philosopher Friedrich Schelling was among the first to write of 'das Unheimlich'/the Uncanny) and in Freudian psychoanalysis, defining that which is uncanny as something that appears familiar, and yet also oddly unfamiliar, to its beholder.

It is this very ambiguity, this cognitive dissonance, that serves as the common thread binding the twenty-four artworks on display: whether achieved through image manipulation that blurs the line between reality and fantasy, such as in the work of Sonja Braas, Elger Esser, Julie Monaco and Jörg Sasse, through the juxtaposition of contrasting elements giving the composition a dreamlike quality (Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld) or, again, through the assemblage of different timelines, analogue and digital, document and fiction (David Claerbout) – an undeniable sense of unease and dislocation permeates this one-of-a-kind exhibition.

Magical Surfaces is curated by Ziba Ardan, founder/director of Parasol unit, who kindly agreed to answer a few of our questions



Jörg Sasse, 2729
2012
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Wilma Tolksdorf © Jörg Sasse, VG Bild- Kunst, Bonn

When did you become interested in the “uncanny”?

The “uncanny” is part of life. I was certainly aware of the concept in my adult life, although since the 1980s, its presence has been felt more in life and art.

And how did the exhibition come together?

Although by definition photography incorporates the concept of the uncanny – presenting reality (familiar), and yet manipulating it and thus allowing for the unfamiliar to happen – I do not recall contemporary photography being made the focus of such a show on the subject of the uncanny. Other art forms have been explored within this concept however. I was waiting for an institution devoted to photography to do this exhibition, but finally decided we will do it at Parasol unit. After all, the foundation often does out of the box exhibitions.

What were the inspirations behind the show?

So many..... the book written by Vilem Flusser *Towards a philosophy of Photography*, which describes the image/surface as magical; Sigmund Freud's remarkable essay on the Uncanny; the book *The Ground of the Image* by Jean-Luc Nancy. There is a fascinating array of works out there to be inspired by.



Elger Esser, Doveglia II Italien
2002
© Elger Esser 2016 Courtesy the artist

***Magical Surfaces* brings together seven artists, each with a very distinctive approach to the theme of the exhibition. If we had to divide them into two groups, I would distinguish between a Romantic group, if you like, in whose work the line between reality and fiction is eerily indistinct and the uncanny almost transfigures into the sublime through the use of either digital or analogue manipulation – a group that includes Elger Esser, Sonja Brass, Julie Monaco and Jörg Sasse – and one formed by Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld, whose works, in my view, maintain what we may call an unmistakable documentary intent. I am probably oversimplifying, but would you agree with this repartition?**

Absolutely, and again the concept of the “sublime” is another special field which has been well investigated, but like the uncanny, it defies to be pinned down. The German artists in the *Magical Surfaces* exhibition have of course been influenced by the Romantic tradition, because of Caspar David Friedrich, but also much more with Goethe and Beethoven and so many other Romantics.

David Claerbout deserves a specific mention, as, to me, he doesn't really fit either group; what do you think?

You are correct. However, he is closer to Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld. He is indeed unique in the way he creates the sense of the uncanny.



Julie Monaco, MC_01/05
2006
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Ernst Hilger, Vienna

Which of the works on display, if I may ask, has the uncanniest appeal to you?
Wow, I usually never make such statements. But they all have something special, depending on our point of view. We are each affected differently by the nature of the uncanny as well as its intensity.



Joel Sternfeld, McLean, Virginia, December 1978
1978 (printed 2003)
© Joel Sternfeld; Courtesy of the artist, Lehring Augustine, New York
and Sabudowicz Collection

As a last question, what's next for Parasol unit?

A solo exhibition of work by Bangladeshi-born, London-based artist Rana Begum, her first major institutional UK show, will open on 29 June 2016 and should be very beautiful. Following that on 1 October 2016, we will present a long awaited exhibition of works from the 80s and 90s by Robert Therrien. Really very few people know of these amazingly intelligent, simple-looking, yet sophisticated works by the American artist.



David Claerbout, *KING* (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)
2015- 2016
Courtesy the artist and galleries Sean Kelly, New York and Micheline Szwaiger, Brussels

***Magical Surfaces: The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography* will be on display until 19th June at Parasol unit, 14 wharf Road, London N1 7RW
www.parasol-unit.org
Words by Jacopo Nuvolari @jacopo982**