

Chapter 2 Once Upon a Time

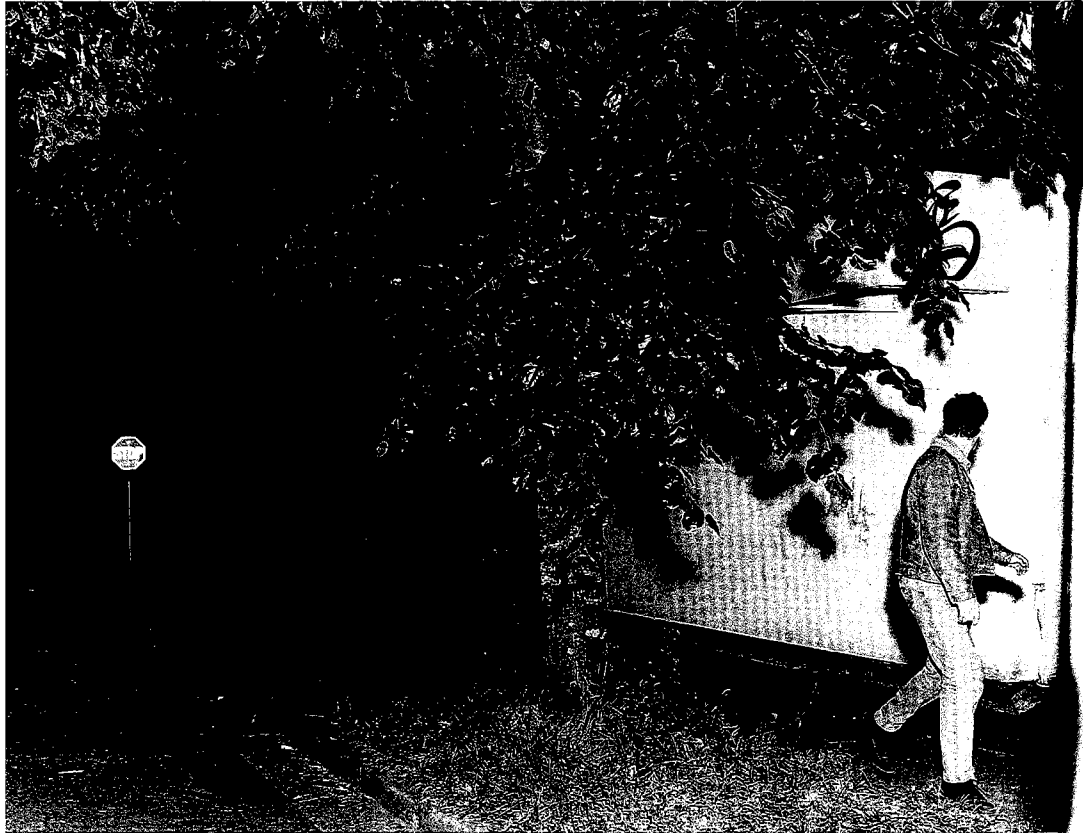
This chapter considers the use of storytelling in contemporary art photography. Some of the photographs shown here make obvious references to fables, fairy tales, apocryphal events and modern myths that are already part of our collective consciousness. Others offer a much more oblique and open-ended description of something that we know is significant because of the way it is set up in the photograph, but whose meaning is reliant on our investing the image with our own trains of narrative and psychological thought.

This area of photographic practice is often described as tableau or tableau-vivant photography, for pictorial narrative is concentrated into a single image: a stand-alone picture. In the mid-twentieth century, photographic narrative was most often played out sequentially, printed as photo-stories and photo-essays in picture magazines. Although many of the photographs illustrated here are parts of larger bodies of work, narrative is loaded into a single frame. Tableau photography has its precedents in pre-photographic art and figurative painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and we rely on the same cultural ability to recognize a combination of characters and props as a pregnant moment in a story. It is important not to think of contemporary photography's affinity to figurative painting as simply one of mimicry or revivalism; instead, it demonstrates a shared understanding of how a scene can be choreographed for the viewer so that he or she can recognize that a story is being told.

One of the leading practitioners of the staged tableau photograph is the Canadian artist Jeff Wall (b. 1946), who came to critical prominence in the late 1980s. His art practice developed in the late 1970s after he had been a postgraduate art history student. Although his photographs are more than mere illustrations of his academic study, they are evidence of a detailed comprehension of how pictures work and are constructed that underpins the best tableau photography. Wall describes his oeuvre

42. Jeff Wall,
Passerby, 1996.

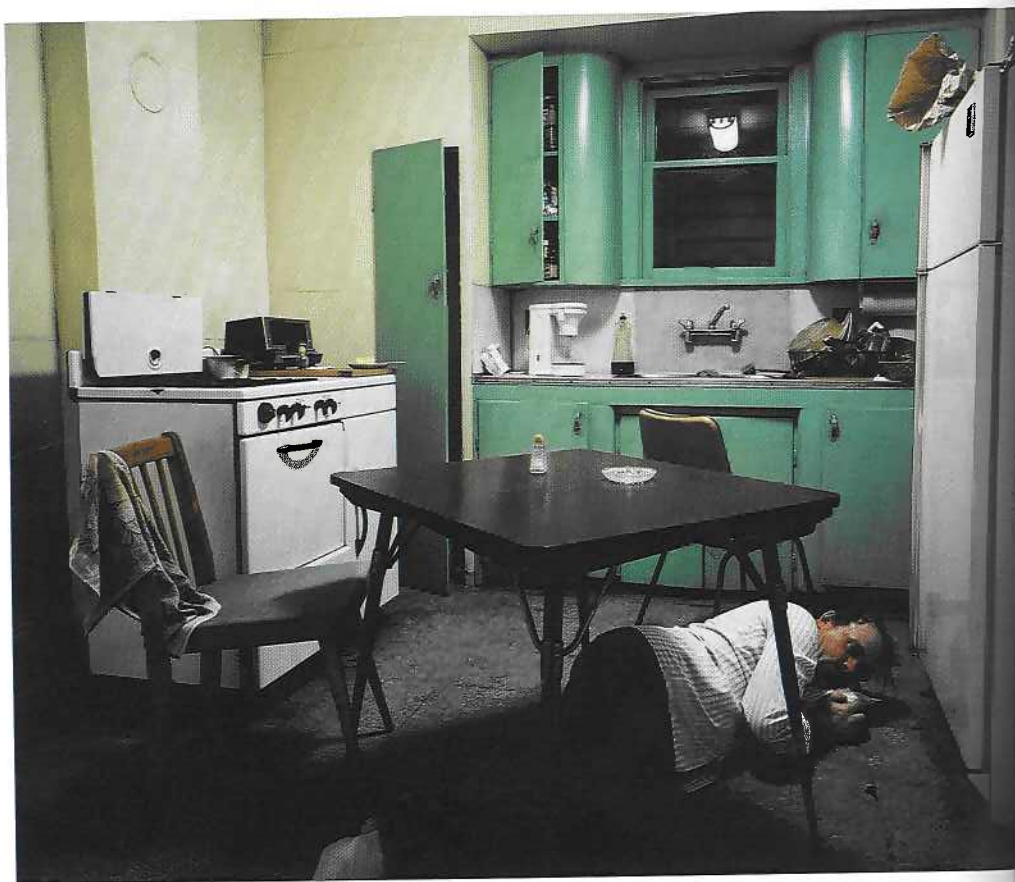
Wall divides photographers into two camps, hunters and farmers, the former tracking down and capturing images, the latter cultivating them over time. In a photograph such as *Passerby*, Wall consciously conflates the two by constructing an image that contains a spontaneous street scene, in this case an allegory about the nature of urban living, the physical dangers and the threat of strangers.



as having two broad areas. One is an ornate style in which the artifice of the photograph is made obvious by the fantastic nature of his stories. Since the mid-1980s he has often utilized digital manipulation to create this effect. The other area is the staging of an event that appears much slighter, like a casually glanced-at scene. *Passerby*, a black-and-white photograph with a figure turned and moving away from the camera, is a case in point, since it initially proposes itself as night-time reportage [42]. Wall sets up a tension between the look and substance of a candid, grabbed photographic moment with his actual process, which is to preconceive and construct the scene.

Insomnia [43] is made with compositional devices similar to Renaissance painting, the angles and objects of a kitchen scene directing us through the picture and leading our understanding of the action and narrative. The layout of the interior acts as a set of clues to the events that could have led up to this moment: the

43. Jeff Wall,
Insomnia, 1994.

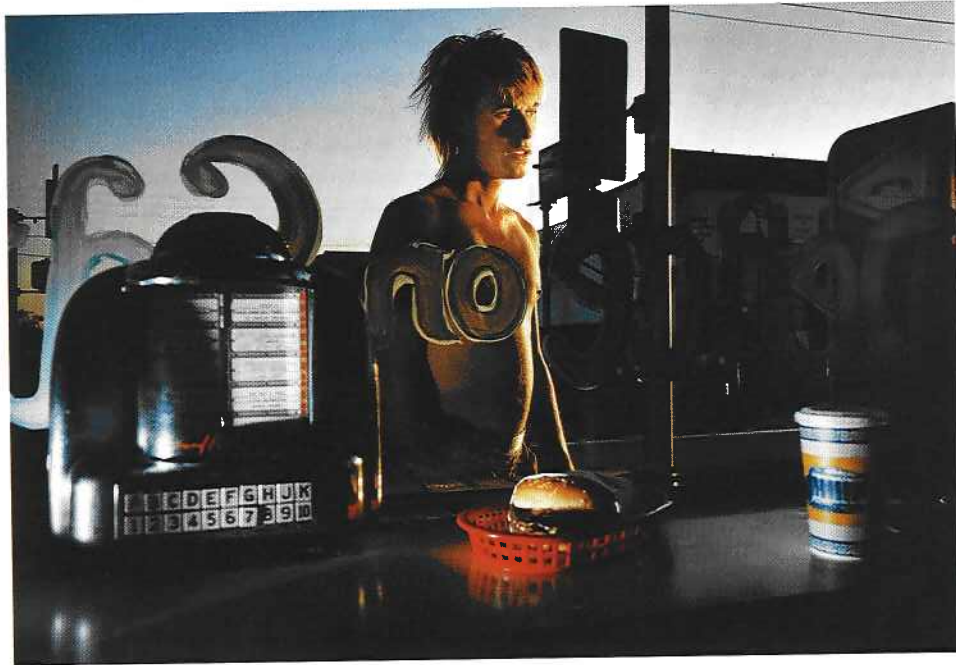


man's movements around the sparse kitchen in his restless state, unsatisfied, resigned to crumpling on the floor in desperation to achieve sleep. The lack of homely details in this kitchen is a reflection perhaps of the lifestyle of the character, of his insomniac state, but also of a theatre set viewed from on stage. The scene is stylized enough for us to suspect that this is a choreographed event functioning as an allegory of psychological distress.

The labour and skill involved in reconstructing such a scene is arguably equivalent to the time and dexterity expended by a painter in his studio. What is also brought into question by such practice, where everything is gathered together expressly for the realization of a photograph, is the idea of the photographer working alone. The use of actors, assistants and technicians needed to create a photographic tableau redefines the photographer as the orchestrator of a cast and crew, the key rather than sole producer. He or she is similar to a film director who imaginatively harnesses collective fantasies and realities.

In galleries, Wall displays many of his images on large light boxes, which, because of their spatial and luminescent qualities, give his photographs a spectacular physical presence. A light box is not quite a photograph, nor is it a painting, but it suggests the experience of both. The use of the light box is often seen as introducing another frame of reference into Wall's work: that of backlit and billboard advertisements. However, although his photographs may have the size and command of advertising, Wall rarely seems to directly critique commercial imagery. Since his work requires the extended looking time of art appreciation, it is fundamentally different from the high and instant impact demanded of street advertisements.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia's *Hollywood* series has set an equally strong and pervasive model for narrative in contemporary art photography. *Hollywood* is a series of portraits of men whom diCorcia met in and around Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood and asked to pose for him. The titles of each photograph tell you the name of the man, his age, where he was born and how much diCorcia paid him to pose. The pictures encourage a kind of storytelling in the viewer's mind. For instance, one wonders what aspirations and high hopes brought these young men to Tinseltown; the small sums of money paid lead one to think that they are now down on their luck and driven to being paid for the photographic use of their bodies (the associations with the sex industry are clear). In *Eddie Anderson; 21 years old; Houston, Texas; \$20* [44], a man, naked from the waist up, is shown



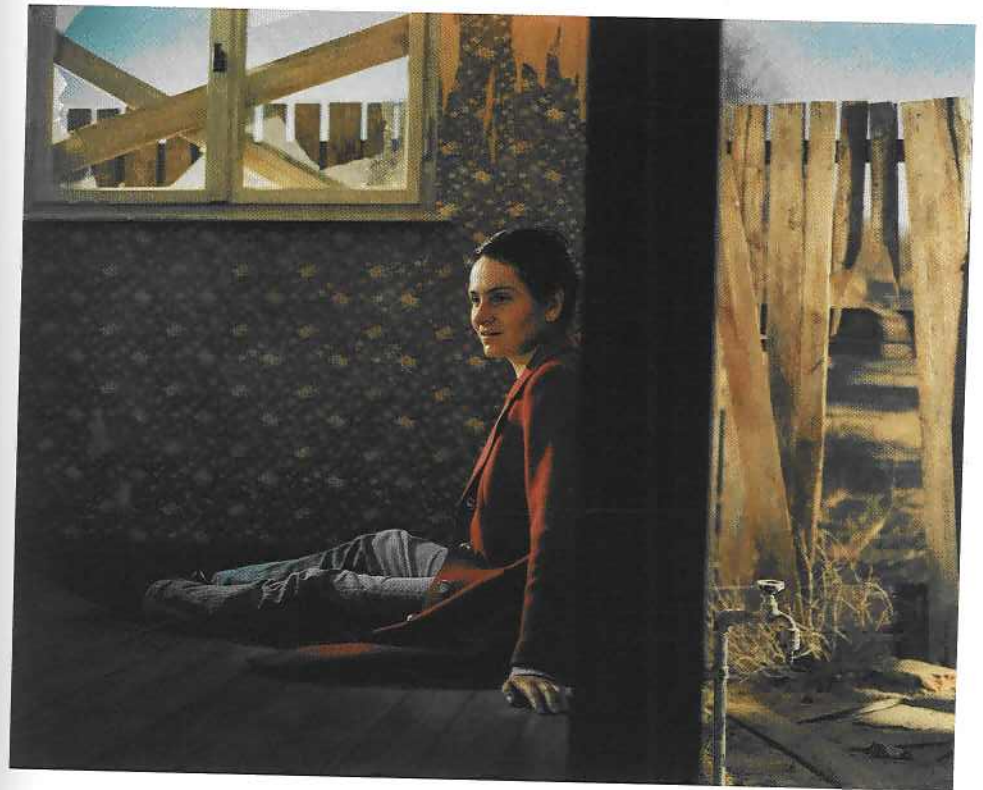
44. **Philip-Lorca diCorcia**,
Eddie Anderson; 21 years old;
Houston, TX; \$20, 1990–92.
Tableau photography often alludes
to the lighting used on a film set,
with lights spotted in a number
of places to create a simulated
naturalism and in anticipation of
actors moving through the scene.
A theatrical and psychological
charge is also added by working
at particular times of day, such
as sunset, where combining
natural and artificial lights leads
to a dramatic sense of place and
narrative.

through the window of a diner. There is a mixed message here: his youthful physique is powerful and available to hire, but at the same time he is literally without a shirt on his back. The image is set at twilight, a time that signifies a turning-point between the safety and normality of daytime and the covert, potentially threatening time of night. This dramatic form of light is often described as 'cinematic', especially in reference to diCorcia's work. Arguably, it is an accurate description of the lighting used in tableau photography in general, which is distinct from the even or single-spotted lighting of photographic portraiture. However, the suggestion that diCorcia's series is cinematic in a wider sense, or indeed that tableau photography proposes itself to be a still version of cinema, is misleading. Tableau photography does not seek to ape the movies in order to enact the same effect on the viewer, and if it were to do so, it would be bound to fail for it does not fully function in the same way. Cinema, figurative painting, the novel and folktales act merely as reference points that help to create the maximum contingent meaning, and to help us accept tableau photography as an imaginative blending of fact and fiction, of a subject and its allegorical and psychological significance.

Theresa Hubbard (b. 1965) and Alexander Birchler (b. 1962) construct photographs that are intentionally ambiguous in their

45. **Teresa Hubbard and
Alexander Birchler**,
Untitled, 1998.

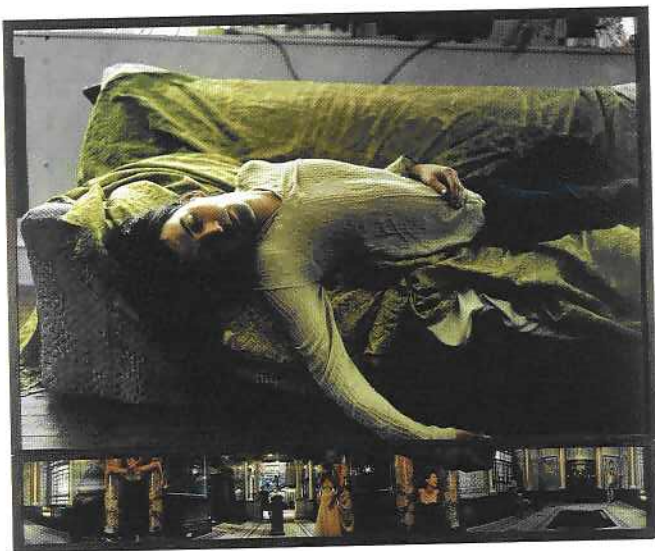
symbolism, but no less emphatic in their narrative charge. Hubbard and Birchler build sets, act alongside their selected cast of professional actors, and direct. In *Untitled* [45], they positioned the camera as if splicing through the floors and walls of a house, creating a curiosity and a dread of what lies beyond the frame, left and right, above and below. The composition has another reading of a strip of film caught between two frames. What this device suggests is the conflation of time that is possible in tableau photography, making a reference to a sequential past, present and future, or to another moment/frame that is only partly visible. Such a division of space and the suggestion of time are similar to the use in Renaissance altarpieces of different moments in the same picture. Tableau photography often refers to specific works of earlier art in this way. British artist Sam Taylor-Wood's (b. 1967) *Soliloquy I* shows the figure of a beautiful young man, expired on a sofa, his right arm hanging lifelessly to the floor [46]. This pose, with the light source positioned behind the figure, emulates a popular work by the Victorian painter Henry Wallis (1830–1916), *The Death Of Chatterton* (1856). The painting shows the shamed



46. Sam Taylor-Wood,

Soliloquy I, 1998.

This image has the rich colour, size and combination of a Pietà-like figure study and frieze of animated action of Renaissance religious paintings and altarpieces. The frieze that runs along the lower edge of the image was made with a 360-degree panning camera.



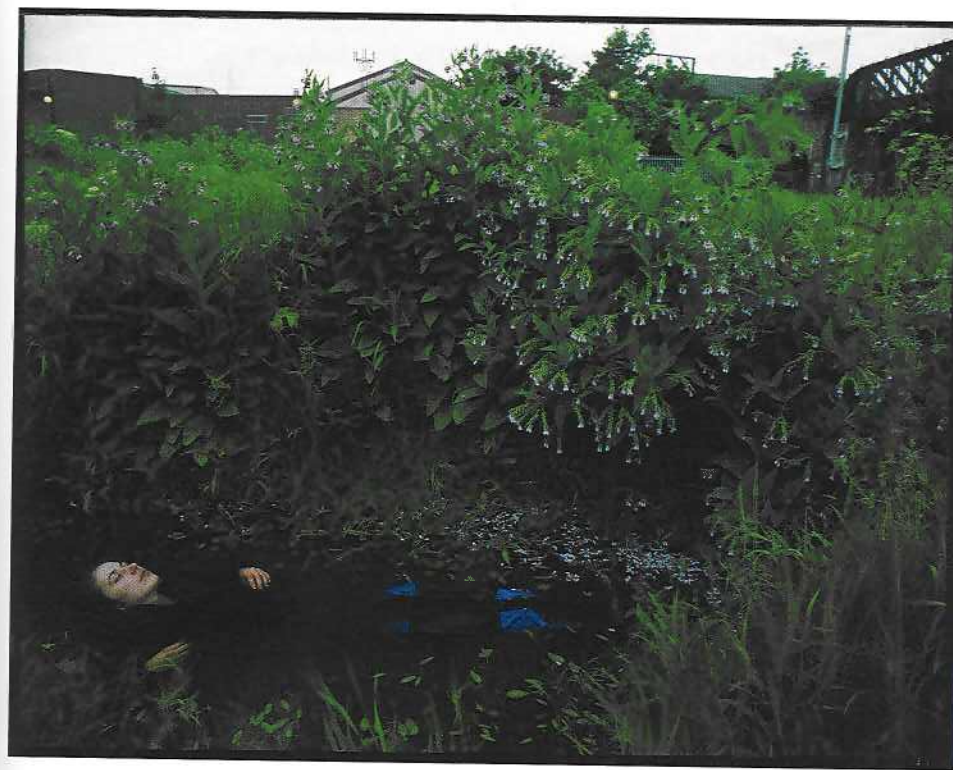
seventeen-year-old poet committing suicide in 1740, after his poetry, which he had presented as the found writings of a fifteenth-century monk, was exposed as the young man's own work. In the mid-nineteenth century, Chatterton represented the idealized character of the young, misunderstood artist whose spirit is smothered by bourgeois disapproval, and his suicide was seen as his last act of self-determination. In her photograph, Taylor-Wood not only remakes a tableau from a period in art history when that was a prevalent and popular form of picture-making but also consciously revives the idealism bound up in Wallis's painting. Taylor-Wood's rich baroque style is often used to create bohemian and dandyish characterizations. Entwining aspects of her own life in her staged photographs – for instance, by including her close friends – Taylor-Wood plays the role of a contemporary court painter, portraying an artistic and social elite of which she is part.

British artist Tom Hunter's (b. 1965) series *Thoughts of Life and Death* [47] also presents contemporary reworkings of Victorian paintings, specifically those of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. *The Way Home* is a direct compositional and narrative reference to John Everett Millais's (1829–1896) *Ophelia* (1851–52), a Victorian recasting of William Shakespeare's tragic character from *Hamlet*. The contemporary stimulus for *The Way Home* was the death of a young woman who had drowned on her way home from a party. The work shows this modern-day Ophelia succumbing to the

water and metamorphosing into nature, an allegory that has had a potency for visual artists for centuries. The luscious colour photography on a large scale parallels the luminous clarity of Millais's painting. This is also the case in Hunter's earlier series *Persons Unknown* (1997), inspired by the paintings of Jan Vermeer (1632–1675), which depicts squatters being served with notices of eviction. When historical visual motifs are used in a contemporary photographic subject in this way, they act as a confirmation that contemporary life carries a degree of symbolism and cultural preoccupation parallel with other times in history, and art's position of being a chronicler of contemporary fables is asserted. With the use of large-format cameras there is a harking back to photography's history and nineteenth-century fashions in tableau melodramas that became parlour-game amusements as well as cheap and collectable alternatives to prints of paintings. In an age when digital photography has usurped analogue traditions within amateur, professional and some artistic practice, to employ larger cameras is in itself a pointed reference to forms of historical photography. Such conscious revivalism is

47. Tom Hunter,

The Way Home, 2000.



48. Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy 19:00 hours*, 1998.



brought into play in the work of British artist Mat Collishaw (b. 1966), who uses outdated, hackneyed and vernacular styles, often with a sentimental or kitsch sensibility, to represent confrontational subjects, such as snowstorm ornaments of tourist sites inhabited by homeless people. Similarly, in *Ideal Boys* (1997), pictures of semi-naked boys are posed within contemporary settings in the quasi-Arcadian manner of the late nineteenth century. The photographs are made with lenticular cameras, a novelty process more commonly used for postcards to create an exaggerated sense of the third dimension. This non-art, lighthearted process allows Collishaw to raise disturbing questions about how our relationship to the bodies of children has shifted from one of sentimentality and adoration to cynicism and difficulty.

Nigerian-born British artist Yinka Shonibare's (b. 1962) *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* [48] features five moments in the day in the life of a dandy, performed by the artist. One of the obvious references is to *The Rake's Progress*, William Hogarth's (1697–1764) painted morality tale of the young cad Tom Rockwell. Hogarth depicted seven episodes in Rockwell's life, each vivid with the pleasure and consequences of the character's debauchery. For his contemporary series, Shonibare constructed scenes representing different moments in the day, all set in historical interiors, with the cast and artist wearing Victorian fancy dress. The Caucasians are shown to be 'colour-blind' to the artist and his skin colour. His place within Victorian society appears to be protected by his guise

as a dandy, the declaration of self-fashioning and authenticity being assured through pronounced artifice in manner and dress. Hogarth's series of paintings, a satire on the state of contemporary society, was engraved and widely published as prints, the eighteenth century's form of mass media. Interestingly, Shonibare's *Victorian Dandy* was commissioned to be shown first as posters on the London Underground system and therefore was intended to function within today's sites of popular and commercial imagery.

Whereas the photographs mentioned above draw on specific imagery and cultural codes for their narratives, other photographers use the tableau formula for much more ambiguous and unreferenced narratives. A dreamlike quality is often created by reducing the specificity of a place and a culture to such a degree that it closes down our expectation of uncovering the 'where and when' of a photograph. In Sarah Dobai's (b. 1965) *Red Room* [49], psychological drama is apparent but left intentionally open-ended. Personal effects are starkly absent from the interior, and it is not clear whether this is a domestic or institutional space. The red blanket could be a sign of a character's taste or a prosaic way of disguising the roughness or dilapidation of the upholstery beneath it. The photograph was in fact taken in Dobai's living space, practical and familiar surroundings in which to stage her psychologically intense series and which allowed some material signs of her life to become part of the work. The pose of the



49. Sarah Dobai, *Red Room*, 2001. As with other photographs by Sarah Dobai, this has almost oppositional, but equally present, readings. The couple's embrace could be either tender or oppressive, with the woman shown in the more powerful role.

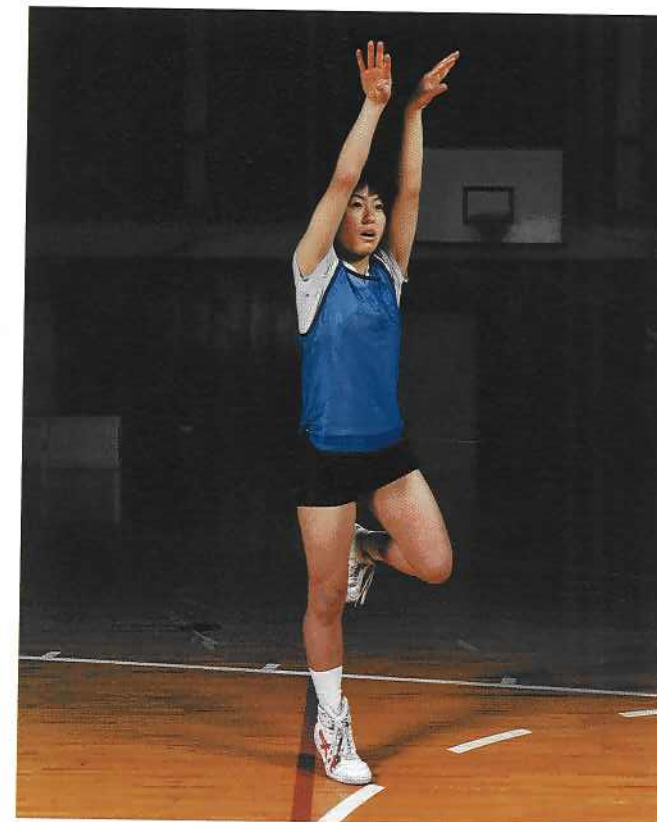
figures is multifaceted, hovering between the moment before or after a kiss or sexual act. Their awkwardness and hidden faces make the encounter tense with uncertainty. The woman's white vest simultaneously denotes the unglamorous nature of domesticated sex and a deep self-consciousness coupled with the common anxiety dream of being seen semi-naked in public.

Dutch artist Liza May Post's (b. 1965) photographs and films have magical, dream-like qualities. She often uses custom-made clothing and props that lift and contort the bodies of the performers into strange forms. In *Shadow* [50], both figures are dressed in androgynous clothes that hide their gender and age. The front figure wears stilted shoes that push the body into a precarious pose. The figure behind is more stable, but is linked by a clawlike prop to a strange wheeled object with a fringed cover extending the sense of fragility of the scene. The details in the photograph are hyper-real and, like a surreal dream, their combination and visual charge leave the narrative open to the viewer's interpretation. One of the great uses of tableau photography is as a format that can carry intense but ambiguous drama that is then shaped by the viewer's own trains of thought.

50. Liza May Post.
Shadow, 1996.



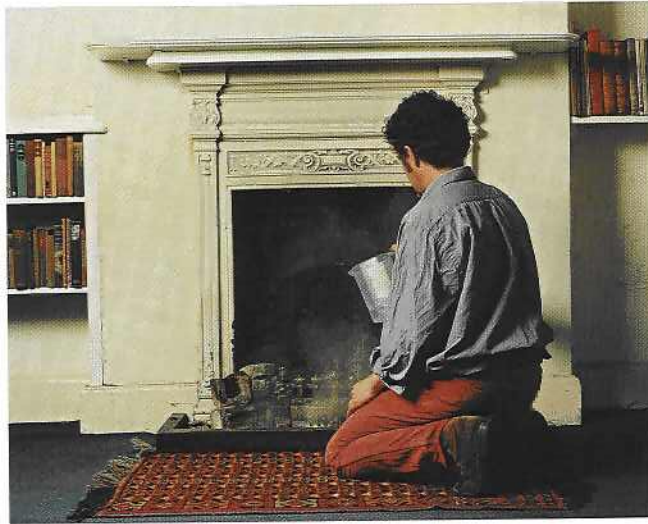
51. Sharon Lockhart,
Group #4: Ayako Sano, 1997.
Lockhart draws out the geometry of the Japanese female basketball players by isolating gestures, moving our attention away from the progress of the match or practice sessions and towards the more abstract and imaginative possibilities their movements suggest.



American photographer Sharon Lockhart (b. 1964) interweaves documentary photography, as a straightforward representation of a subject, with elements that begin to disrupt our certainty of such a photographic status. Lockhart's series of photographs, accompanied by a short film, depicting a Japanese all-girl basketball team, demonstrates a balance between fact and fiction for which she is well known [51]. She frames single figures and groups of players and crops out enough of the indoor court to begin to abstract the nature of their movements and the game. In *Group #4: Ayako Sano*, Lockhart has isolated the balletic pose of a single figure so that the girl's action, understood as participation in a match, becomes tenuous, perhaps a posture that the photographer has orchestrated entirely. That doubt pervades the meaning of the image; the rules of the game played and the documentary function are both equally subverted.

One of the pictorial devices used in tableau photography to engender anxiety or uncertainty about the meaning of an image is

52. **Frances Kearney,**
Five People Thinking the Same Thing,
III, 1998.



to depict figures with their faces turned away from us, leaving their character unexplained. In Frances Kearney's (b. 1970) series *Five People Thinking the Same Thing* [52], five individuals are shown in this way undertaking simple activities in sparse domestic interiors. The thoughts preoccupying these unidentified figures are not revealed, leaving it up to the viewer's imagination to draw out potential explanations from the subtle and simplified depictions of a person's gestures and habitat.

Hannah Starkey's (b. 1971) *March 2002* [53] uses this same device to give the figure of a woman sitting in an Oriental canteen a surreal and mysterious air. The possible readings of the woman's character are somewhere between a sophisticated urban dweller awaiting an assignation and a more imaginary creature with long grey hair curls around her shoulders like a mermaid from the watery scene on the canteen wall. There is a sense that Starkey's staged photographs elaborate on observations she has made, investing familiar scenes with imaginative potential by restaging and embellishing them as subtle photographic dramas with a fantastical edge. In both Kearney's and Starkey's depictions of figures turned away, we are not given enough visual information to make characterization the focal point of the image. Instead, we make meaning from a dynamic process of connecting interior space and objects with the possible characters of the people depicted. The staging around the figures is much more than the confirmation of their identities; they are the only clue we have to who they might be.

53. **Hannah Starkey,**
March 2002, 2002.
Starkey's tableau photographs are highly preconceived. Her working process starts with the building of a mental image of a scene. The search for a location, casting and choreographing of the photographs are merely the practical execution of a picture that is already complete in the artist's mind.



This otherworldliness found in contemporary life is also a theme in the work of the Polish-American artist Justine Kurland (b. 1969). Her scenes are the playgrounds of nymph-like young women (although older women and men are now also represented in her work) in places of natural beauty [54]. Kurland's is a modern-day staging of contemporary idylls with a hint of nostalgia for the back-to-nature lifestyles of the 1960s, in locations where the grass is green and the sunsets are beautiful.

British artist Sarah Jones's recent portrayal of young girls posed in interiors are consciously constructed out of the tension between the authentic and the projected, both in terms of imagery and experience. In *The Guest Room (bed) I* [55], a girl is shown lying on the bed in a faded and impersonal room. Because

54. **Justine Kurland,**
Buses on the Farm, 2003.
Kurland creates landscapes, in which she depicts a mainly female cast of part-woodland nymphs and part-hippy chicks, that blend contemporary and historical elements to convey a sense of otherworldly communities.



55. Sarah Jones,
The Guest Room (bed) I, 2003.



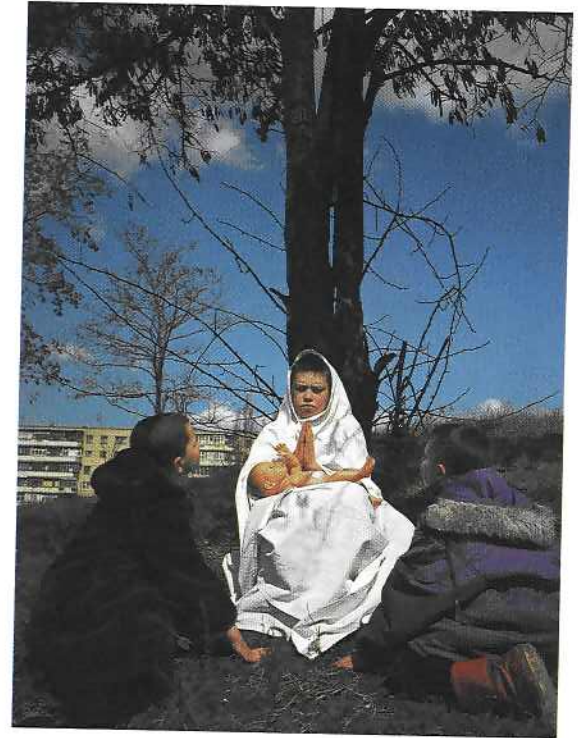
the indication is that the girl is not portrayed in her own room, the bed becomes a motif, its symbolism drawn from art history (Manet's *Olympia* comes to mind), and the horizon its bulk creates also triggers associations with the formal compositions of land- and seascapes. While the girl's long hair is naturalistic, it is not connected to any specific contemporary fashion, in order that her character retains its ambiguity as both archetypal and personal. Similarly, her pose is in part a spontaneous response to the situation that Jones has orchestrated for the photographic shoot, while at the same time appearing to be drawn from the pre-photographic gestures of reclining female figures in the histories of painting and sculpture.

A related pivoting between choreographing and documenting is evident in Sergey Bratkov's *Italian School* series, which was made in a reform school in his home town of Kharkov in the Ukraine. Bratkov gained the local authorities' permission to photograph the children only by agreeing that the project would include religious instruction. Bratkov decided that he would direct the children, who had been interned for being destitute, stealing and prostitution, in biblical plays within the fenced grounds of the school. He then photographed their performances.

Wendy McMurdo's (b. 1962) *Helen, Backstage, Merlin Theatre (the glance)* [57], in which digital technology is used to represent a child and her doppelgänger, is an example of tableau photography in which the constructed nature of the image is foregrounded. The girls look quizzically at their doubles on a theatre stage (the choice of setting an allusion to the staged photograph as well as to the

56. Sergey Bratkov,
#1, 2001.

As part of an artistic group in Kharkov in the Ukraine that also included Boris Mikhailov (see page 189), Bratkov creates work in which there is a brutal clash between artistic performance and documentary photography. In the *Italian School* series, Bratkov photographed dress rehearsals of religious plays he had directed at a reform school.



57. Wendy McMurdo,
Helen, Backstage, Merlin Theatre (the glance), 1996.



transformative space of theatre). Where tableau photography has visualized collective fears and fantasies with an emphasis on the uncanny, the use of youthful protagonists has been especially prevalent. This has been the visually and psychologically powerful device used by the Cuban artist Deborah Mesa-Pelly (b. 1968), who recasts fairy tales and popular stories with young female characters and with disturbing results. Her sets and props are instantly recognizable as coming from children's stories, such as the red shoes worn by Dorothy in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), made into a popular film in 1939, or the bedroom in which Goldilocks is awakened by the return of the three bears. Mesa-Pelly stages situations that could be scenes from the stories as they are conventionally told, but dramatized and given a sinister edge by her lighting and voyeuristic camera angles. She also, as below, mixes and twists storylines: the legs of Goldilocks, or perhaps Dorothy, are shown with the phallic tail of the pantomime lion curled around her.

58. Deborah Mesa-Pelly, *Legs*, 1999.



59. Anna Gaskell, *Untitled #59 (by proxy)*, 1999.



Anna Gaskell's (b. 1969) photographs share this intense storytelling quality that combines a number of the common devices of tableau photography: a cast of children, sometimes with their faces obscured, their play gone awry or turned nasty. The image shown here, from the *By Proxy* series [59], has both a literary source in the Sally Salt character from Rudolf Raspe's (1737–94) *Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1785) and real-life foundations in the true story of Geneva Jones, a paediatric nurse convicted of murdering her patients in 1984. The photographs mix the seductive and the abhorrent, the good girl and the fetish status of the nurse's costumes, and the enactment of childhood play that seems to take a potentially sinister turn. The physical beauty of the prints, combined with the moral ambiguity of the narrative, makes for an unnerving visual pleasure. This is one of the dominant characteristics of tableau photography that centres on the uncanny: work that is, in terms of its narrative meaning, socially subversive or difficult is often carried in an aesthetic that is rich

60. Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin,

The Widow (Black), 1997.

Van Lamsweerde and Matadin have successful careers creating some of the most innovative photography for advertising and editorial fashion photography. When working in this context, their authorship is shared, but in their art projects van Lamsweerde is cited as the artist (working with Vinoodh Matadin), in part an acknowledgment of the art world's preference for single authorship.



and seductive to the eye. We almost realize too late the true meaning of what we have been drawn to, enjoyed and appreciated.

Dutch artist Inez van Lamsweerde (b. 1963) and her partner Vinoodh Matadin (b. 1961) create photographs for both art and fashion, which in the 1990s shared an aesthetic of digitized perfection while presenting troubling narratives. In their series *The Widow* [60], a prepossessed girl is shown immaculately styled into a complex character invested with religious, funereal and fashionable qualities. The process of realizing such intense and mannered art works is close to the working practices of fashion. Van Lamsweerde and Matadin develop intricate storylines and character descriptions before arranging the styling of a shoot, and take great care in the casting of the actors and models. They have, since the early 1990s, used digital technology to refine their otherworldly visions yet further. Fashion requires that they work fast and perpetually change, meeting and often raising the experimental capacities of the industry. Their art projects aim higher (and take longer), unconstrained by the commissioning process and requirements of fashion. There is a sense, however, that the frequent reinvention of a photographic style or approach that fashion requires has acted as a liberation for their art to explore new visual territories, their use of tableau photography

being just one among several aesthetic modes in which they have worked in the last ten years.

In Japanese artist Mariko Mori's (b. 1967) photographs (which, like Jeff Wall's, are often displayed on light boxes) and installations, the production values are like those of luxurious commercial image-making, and they often resemble the architecture and point-of-sale design of contemporary fashion houses. The mixture of Far Eastern traditional arts with contemporary consumer culture is part of Mori's trademark. She cherry-picks a range of styles and cultural references to bring the role of the photographer into close parallel with the visual inventiveness of a fashion stylist and art director. A regular theme in her work is the persona of the artist herself, who is often the central figure in her photographs [61]. Mori's fashion-college and art-school training, together with a stint as a model, gave her the skills to create an art of spectacle, one that is knowingly shaped by its references to consumer culture.

American artist Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962) has said that his elaborately constructed melodramas are influenced by his memory of childhood. His psychoanalyst-father's office was in the basement of their New York City home, and Crewdson would press his ear to the floorboards to try and imagine the stories being told in the therapy sessions. In the mid-1990s, Crewdson's tableau photographs were set in models of suburban backyards and undergrowth built in his studio. They are a mix of the bizarre and the disturbing, yet are also highly camp and entertaining. Stuffed animals and birds perform strange and ominous rituals, while plaster casts of Crewdson's body are shown being slowly

61. Mariko Mori,
Burning Desire, 1996–98.





62. **Gregory Crewdson**,
Untitled (Ophelia), 2001.
In this photograph, Crewdson recasts Shakespeare's Ophelia in post-war American suburbia. The *Twilight* series, of which this is part, brims with such elaborate scenes that reference sci-fi films, fables, modern myths and theatre.

devoured by insects, surrounded by lush foliage. Crewdson later shifted into a more directorial mode. In his black-and-white series *Hover* (1996–97), he staged strange happenings in suburban housing areas, photographing them from a crane above the rooftops. More recently, in his *Twilight* series [62], he worked with a cast and crew of the kind found on a film set. Here it is not only the display of rituals and the paranormal but also the construction of archetypal characters who carry out these acts that create the psychological drama. Significantly, at the back of the book about the *Twilight* series is a 'documentary views' section that shows the entire production process, the crew members, and the moments before and after a photograph is taken, confirming the degree to which Crewdson's tableau photography is a production issue.

Fellow American Charlie White's (b. 1972) series of nine photographs *Understanding Joshua* [63] implants the character of Joshua, a part-human and part-alien puppet crafted out of sci-fi references, into scenes of American teenage suburban life. Joshua is White's self-loathing protagonist with a fragile ego manifested in his physicality, seemingly a difference unnoticed by his friends and

family. The photographs are not only playful but also offer an antidote to the strongly female bias in both subjects and practitioners in tableau photography.

Japanese artist Izima Kaoru's (b. 1954) photography injects a very different form of masculinity through the adoption of a strongly voyeuristic staging of beautiful, erotic accidents that lead to the deaths of women resplendent in designer clothing [64]. These fantasies combine a seductive photographic style with a narrative told from a sexualized point of view. Moreover, Kaoru's titles for his series give the names of the model, often well known, and the name of the designer label she is wearing. This is a homage to the device in fashion photography since the 1970s of pairing ideas of cultural and commercial beauty with abject social narratives.



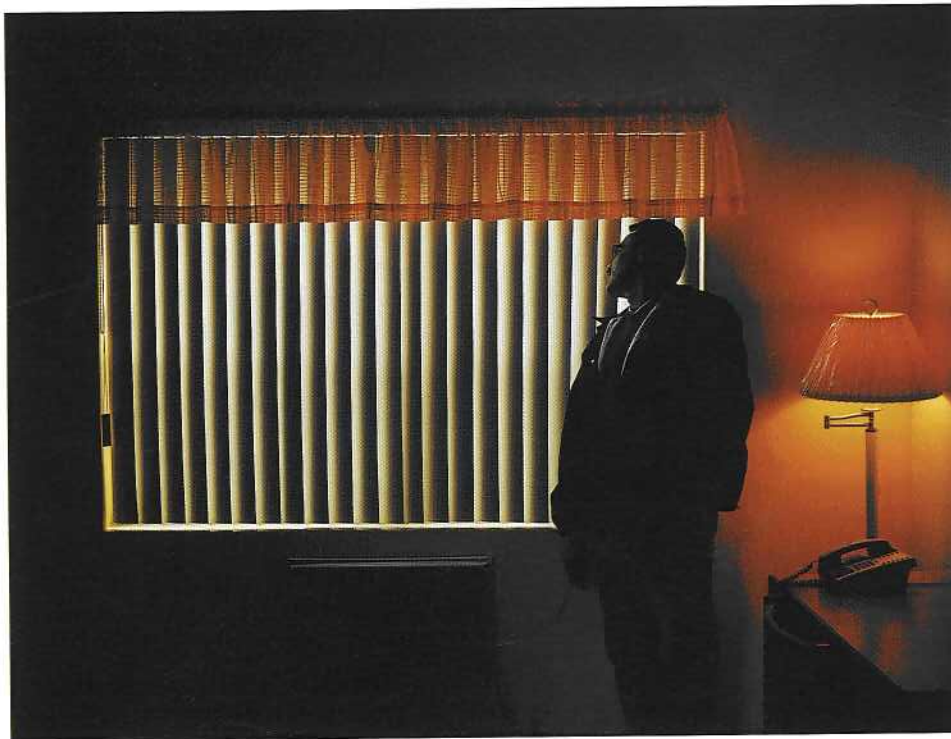
63. **Charlie White**,
Ken's Basement, 2000.
White's photographs perform a difficult task within the context of art, and that is to inject some humour. Since completing this photograph, White has re-created kitsch imagery of sweet animals in fairytale settings that both critique and revel in the saccharine side of popular postcard and calendar imagery.

64. **Izima Kaoru**,
#302, *Aure Wears Paul & Joe*, 2001.



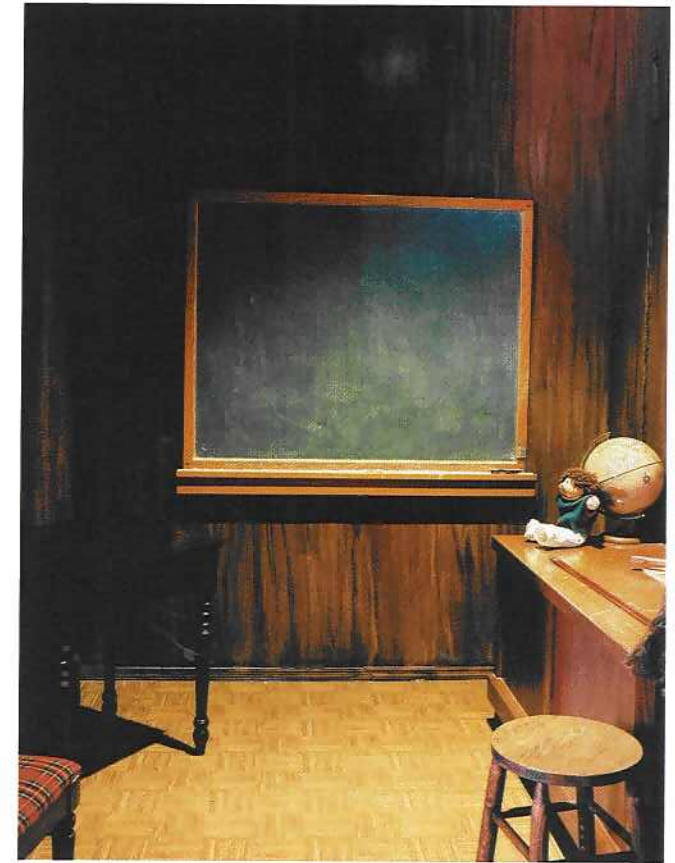
The indeterminate social or political stance of the photographer in much tableau photography is used to great effect in British artist Christopher Stewart's (b. 1966) *United States of America* [65]. The blinds of a hotel room are closed in daytime; a man possibly of Middle Eastern origin is surreptitiously surveying the outdoors while waiting for the telephone to ring. It feels like a covert operation, but we are unsure if it is within or outside the boundaries of the law. Stewart photographs private security firms (made up of ex- or serving militia personnel), finding contemporary allegories for Western insecurity and paranoia. What is interesting about his approach is that rather than taking the conventional route of documentary or photojournalism in his depiction of real security situations, he chooses to use the formula of tableau photography to give a weighty drama to the stakeouts he witnesses.

65. Christopher Stewart, *United States of America*, 2002. This photograph was taken while shadowing security professionals on training sessions. What is surprising, given the drama of the lighting and lack of distracting detail in the interior, is that Stewart did not choreograph the figure or alter the interior at all.



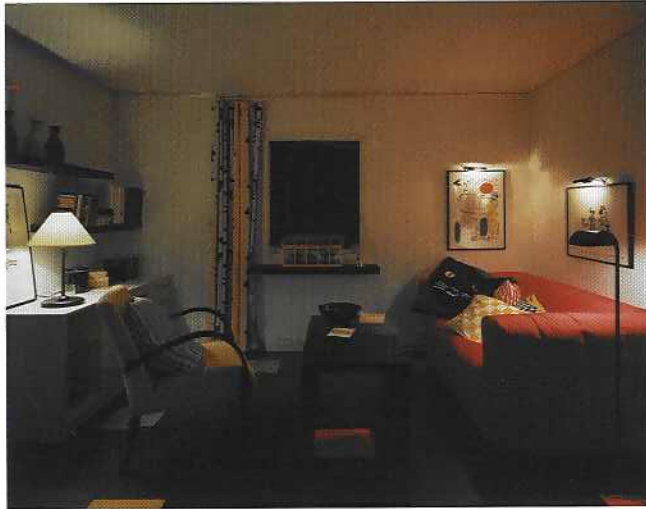
66. Katharina Bosse, *Classroom*, 1998.

An artist who photographs rooms that can be hired for sex, themed to cater for the most popular sexual fantasies, Bosse depicts them while they are empty, like stage sets before or after a performance.



San Francisco and Los Angeles are legally hired as venues for sex, and what is drawn out in Bosse's representations is the generic and clichéd nature of sexual fantasies, the crossing over from intimate to institutional spaces. This gives Bosse's photographs a poignant reading, one in which architectural spaces contain a trace of an act that will generate stories. Since the mid-1990s, the Swedish artist Miriam Bäckström (b. 1967) has taken a different but parallel form of enquiry in her photographs of room reconstructions in museums and domestic furnishing stores. The seemingly unexceptional room shown on page 72 and the vantage point of the camera mean that at first the image could be taken to be a documentary photograph of a domestic interior or a perfunctory advertising shot for a store [67]. Bäckström is asking us to engage with the plausibility of the room so that we can think about the institutionalized and commercialized construct of the

67. **Miriam Bäckström,**
*Museums, Collections and
Reconstructions, IKEA Corporate
Museum, 'IKEA throughout the Ages',
Älmhult, Sweden, 1999, 1999.*

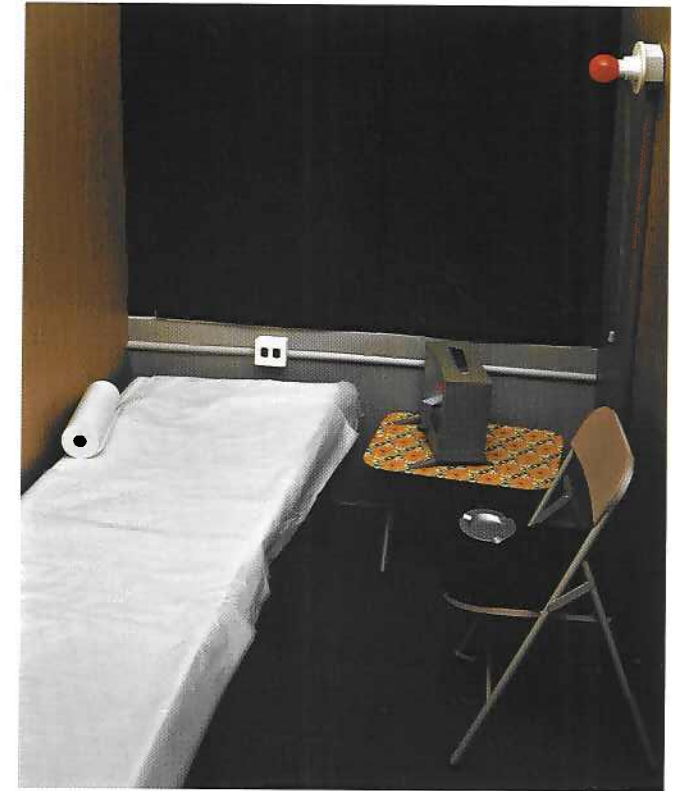


domestic living area. A space that we may ordinarily consider to be defined by an individual's tastes and activities is shown as being prescribed. Our display of personal identity in our homes is not only commercially reproducible but also easily mimicked. Canadian Miles Coolidge's (b. 1963) *Safetyville* project [68] has an uncanny feel in its depiction of an abandoned town, devoid of people, litter and personal details. Safetyville is a model town in California (one third the scale of a real town) built in the 1980s to educate schoolchildren about road safety. In Coolidge's photographs, the corporate and federal signage that gives plausible detail to the town is prominent, highlighting the extent to which the organization of contemporary Western life by business and government pervades even this fake urban space.

68. **Miles Coolidge,**
*Police Station, Insurance Building,
Gas Station, from the Safetyville
project, 1996.*



69. **Thomas Demand,**
Salon (Parlour), 1997.



German photographer Thomas Demand (b.1964) deals with the obstinate presence of inanimate objects, mainly within architectural interiors [69]. Demand starts his construction process with a photograph of an architectural place, sometimes a specific space, such as Jackson Pollock's studio barn or the underpass in Paris where Princess Diana was fatally injured. He then builds a simplified model of the scene in his studio, using Styrofoam, paper and card. At times, he leaves small signs of the imperfection of his reconstruction, with tears or gaps in the paper as a way of signalling to the viewer that this is not a fully convincing reconstruction of a site. He then photographs the scene. Despite the lack of wear or dirt on the model and the recognition of its construction from flimsy materials, and hence of its non-functioning nature, the viewer is encouraged to decipher the significance of the space and the human acts that might have taken place there. It makes for a hyperconscious stance, as we look for narrative form despite the in-built warning signs that this is a staged, therefore unreal, place. The closeness with which we as

viewers are placed to the scenes and the large scale of the works make us less an audience looking onto an empty stage and more investigators of how little of a physical subject, and how much of the photographic approach, we need in order to start the process of imagining meaning and narrative.

British artist Anne Hardy's (b. 1970) photographs depict interiors that appear abandoned. Like Demand, Hardy constructs sets in her studio with the camera position worked out so that nothing exists beyond what is seen in the photograph. The skill of making a photograph such as *Lumber* [70] is to avoid overloading the image with obvious signs and allegory, but to maintain a sense, albeit a fabricated one, that we are looking at an observed rather than a meticulously constructed scene. Hardy's photographs start with her finding objects that have been discarded on urban streets, objects that have lost their original place and function, around which she then creates sets. In this photograph, the trees were found on the streets of London in the weeks after the Christmas festivities. The space looks like a storeroom for

70. Anne Hardy.
Lumber, 2003–04.



71. James Casebere.

Pink Hallway #3, 2000.

Casebere photographs small-scale models that reduce the architectural space to a fragile set of surfaces and disrupt our belief in the solidity and permanence of man-made space.



unwanted Christmas trees, but the indoor environment, the menacing shape of the mound of greenery and the thought of what might lie beneath it make for a compelling hovering between what this place might actually be and the unsettling atmosphere within it.

Since the late 1970s, the American James Casebere (b. 1953) has built architectural models for his photographs on a tabletop scale in his studio. His approach is more specifically about investigating institutional spaces in which all paraphernalia of human use has been taken out. His series of photographs of prison and monastery cells reduces the scene to a monochromatic and isolated environment, the sense of waiting and of nothing happening being made emphatic. *Pink Hallway #3* (2000) [71] is a model based on one of the corridors in the Phillips Andover Academy, an early nineteenth-century boarding school in Massachusetts. Casebere has stripped the institution of its details and then flooded the scene in an attempt to create a sense of surreal and claustrophobic disorientation.

German artist Rut Blees Luxemburg (b. 1963) uses the elemental devices of lighting and water reflections to create magnificent amber imagery of urban architecture. The works in her *Liebeslied* (love poem) series (1998–2000) are independent but aesthetically connected architectural scenes. In *In Deeper* [72], the viewer is placed within the scene (at the top of the steps of a river embankment). Footprints are left in the wet silt on the steps leading into the luminescent river, revealed by raking lighting. Luxemburg's photographs are magnificent additions to the visual repertoire of night-time urban photography since the experimental and surreal use of portable flash lighting in the 1920s and 1930s. The principle through the ensuing century has remained the same: when the urban night scene is illuminated in a dramatic way, the surreal and psychologically charged potential of space is emphasized. But each epoch has its own artistic concerns and own particular narrative conclusions. With their uncanny qualities, Luxemburg's pictures take something of the history of night-time photography, but imbues it with the contemporary and personal experience of the city.

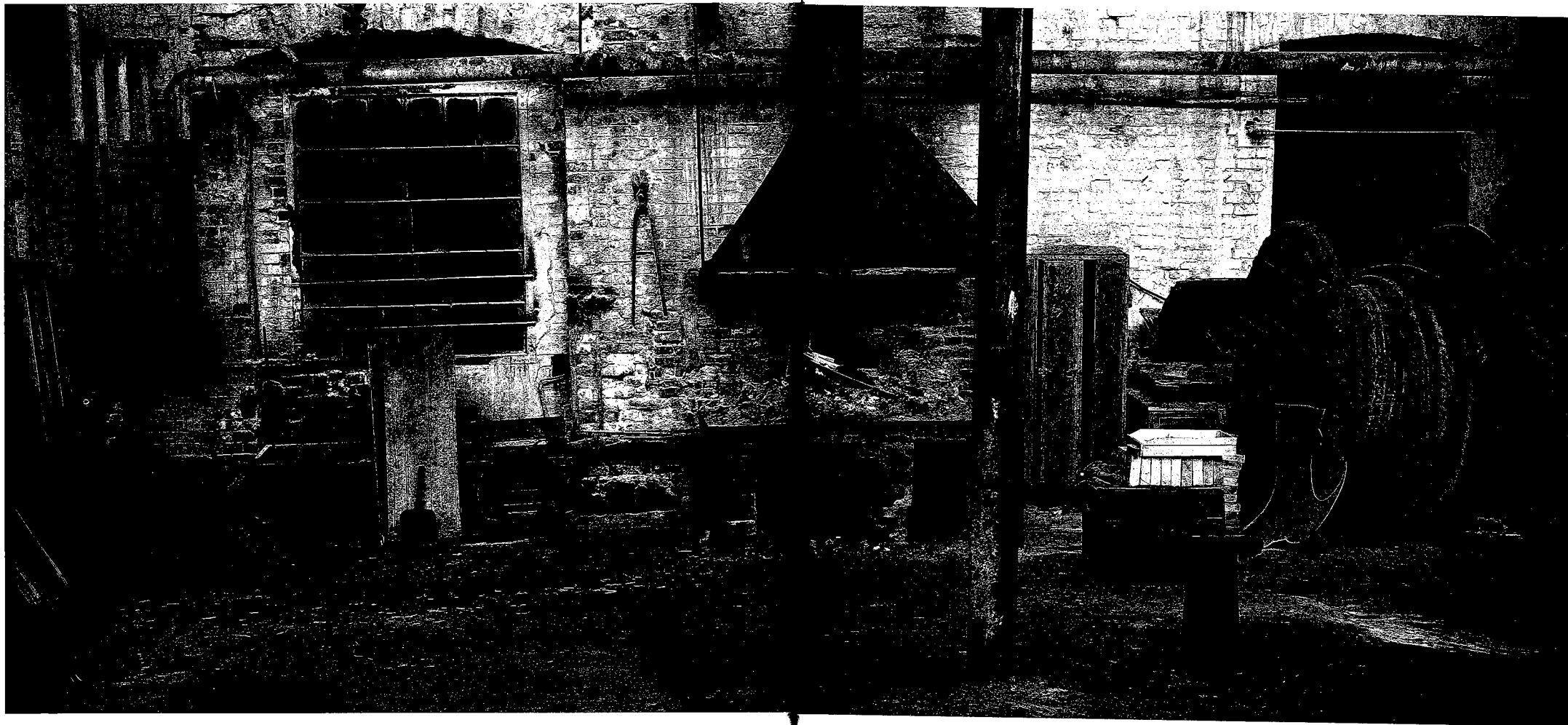
72. Rut Blees Luxemburg,
Nach Innen/In Deeper, 1999.



73. Desiree Dolron,
Cerca Paseo de Martí, 2002.

The pictorial conflation of an event just passed and the history of a place embedded in its fabric form the basis of the narratives of Dutch artist Desiree Dolron's (b. 1963) *Cerca Paseo de Martí* [73]. The work depicts a classroom in Havana, Cuba, in which empty chairs face the impassioned political statements chalked on the blackboard and the portrait of a young Fidel Castro (b. 1927) to the right. Although more directly political, perhaps, in its narrative than the work of Demand, Casebere, Luxemburg, Hardy and Bosse shown here, this photograph similarly encourages us to mentally fill the visual absence of people through the traces of their actions and thoughts. Dolron's Cuban project takes place in a country whose forty-five-year revolution to build a flourishing and independent country endures to this day. She finds the spirit and contradictions of its culture in poetic erosion, embodied in the peeling paint and cracks of Havana's architecture, and the signs of its continued politicization of daily life.

In both her studio-based still lifes and her street-scene photographs, British artist Hannah Collins (b. 1956) has made a



substantial contribution to developing the phenomenological effect of architectural tableau photography. Her photographs are large and backed onto (or directly printed onto) a canvas fabric that is pinned to gallery walls. *In the Course of Time, 6 (Factory, Krakow)* [74] is over two metres in height and five metres in length. In the presence of such a work, the viewer is offered an essentially physical relationship to the scene. The Polish factory is not life size, but gives the viewer the feeling of approaching and being about to enter the pictorial space. Another allusion could be to a stage set moments before the performance begins. In the 1990s, much of Collins's work was a meditation on post-Communist Europe. It traced the way contemporary life, shaped by both

74. Hannah Collins,
*In the Course of Time, 6 (Factory
Krakow)*, 1996.

historical and recent events, marks architectural spaces. Combining the signs of enduring and changing ways of working, they contain within their fabric the very history of a society. Collins's photography reveals and draws out these histories. Her use of the panoramic format aids her in this respect, for it calls for the sustained and contemplative looking that art has traditionally required of the viewer, and from which we can decipher subtle narratives of human behaviour and history.