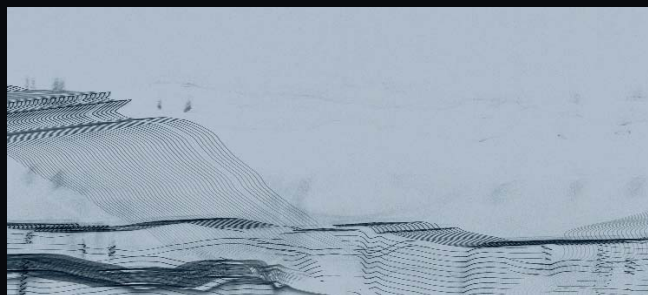
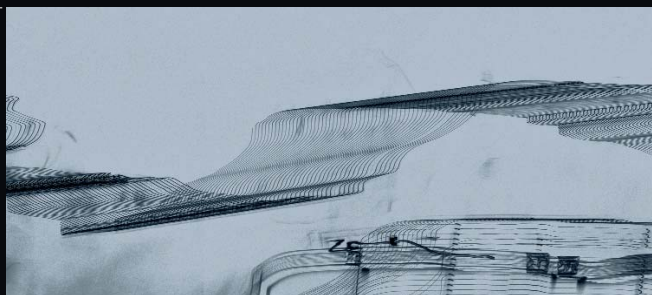


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# **Sigune Hamann** A very short space of time through very short times of space

70



Sigune Hamann  
*Film strip (Tivoli Gardens,  
Copenhagen)*  
2008  
courtesy Gallery of  
Photography

When it comes to capturing either movement or a moment, both painting and photography are deceitful. The implication of the painterly techniques employed by artists like Jack B Yeats and Basil Blackshaw (I'm thinking particularly of Yeats' horse-race paintings, and Blackshaw's *Bulldog*, 1981, which is in the AIB Collection), that here is movement frozen in time, yet poised on the cusp of further dynamic action, is an illusion. Obviously. Equally illusory is that still quality of a single moment, preserved in paint, that was the stock-in-trade of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painters, with their vignettes of interiors. There is duration in painting, a process. The period of a painting is the time it takes to create it.

Not so with photography, its period being the fraction of a second for which the aperture is open. Yet photographs are equally unable to replicate the quality of seeing, for not only is there composition, and exclusion, within the frame of the photograph, but also the eye does not see a fraction of a second's stillness. Our idea of the still image comes from a personal editing of moving data. Sigune Hamann's exhibition, *a very short space of time through very short times of space*, at the Gallery of Photography, addresses itself to these dynamics by use of long exposures of stills, and of film strips, to create images that are painterly in quality, filmic in movement, and yet are ultimately, nonetheless, static photographs.

The most dramatic of these, *film-strip (whatever it's doing it's doing it now)*, 2008, is placed in the long window of the gallery, as a site-specific installation. And, by its site-specificity, it addresses itself to the architecture of the gallery as well as to the history of photography (nineteenth-century dioramas, the camera obscura – and in particular Richard Torchia's camera-obscura installation in the same space in

2002). The Gallery of Photography was designed by architects O'Donnell + Tuomey to resemble a Box Brownie camera, and this sense of exploring the idea of a camera, in a building created to resemble a camera, while looking at the implications of photography, adds an extra layer of cleverness to the work. It also distracts from the more interesting aesthetics and poetics of viewing.

Another addition, perhaps illuminating, perhaps another distraction, is the exhibition's title, carried through to an epigram at the end of the catalogue. *a very short space of time through very short times of space*, comes from *Ulysses*. Stephen Dedalus is walking on a beach, "a stride at a time," his steps bringing with them the idea of inevitable progression, one after another. It is also preceded by the line "shut your eyes and see."<sup>1</sup> And with this, the notion of cleverness grows to a threatening suspicion. It is to be found again in the series of inverted photographs, *heimlich*, 2007, where the everyday bucolic scenes are reflections in water. Flipped over, their uncanny beauty becomes a little more ordinary.

This is at the heart of Hamann's project, not the ordinariness, but its opposite. From "shut your eyes and see" to re-orienting your eyes and seeing differently, the exhibition brings a little magic back that which should never, perhaps, have become 'normal' in the first place. The only issue is to divest yourself of the intellectual gimmicks of site-specificity and epigram, and to instead revel in those aesthetics and poetics. This is not to adopt an anti-intellectual stance, rather an anti-intellectualised one, perhaps borrowing from Susan Sontag's *Against interpretation* exhortation which, although made back in 1964, carries a resonance in this context: "Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted,

now. Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our senses. Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience."<sup>2</sup> And this is the territory in which Hamann's work really sings.

So, returning to that idea of the moment of an image, what it represents, and how it is to be seen in terms of a reflection of, or comment on, the real: John Berger suggests that a painting is only finished, "not when it finally corresponds to something already existing – like the second shoe of a pair – but when the foreseen ideal moment of its being looked at is filled, as the painter feels or calculates it ought to be."<sup>3</sup> Even though this is applied to painting, it can be extended to embrace contemporary photography. It is not the object, but the seeing of the object that closes the circle of meaning. Sigune Hamann's project in the Gallery of Photography is an attempt to capture both the dynamics of looking, and the dynamics of making; to extend the period of the photograph, and multiply the moments at which it may be completed.

1 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Bodley Head, London, 1958, p 34

2 Susan Sontag (1964), and collected in *Against interpretation*, Vintage, London, 1994

3 John Berger, *And our faces my, my heart, brief as photos*, Pantheon, New York, 1984, p 26

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