
UNDER



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THE IMPORTANT OB DURACY OF MARK PURDOM'S *UNDER*

Edward Hanfling

Images are hierarchical; they typically have four edges, and the shapes or subjects placed within those edges tend to assume a kind of order, so that some of them appear more prominent, more important, than others. It is important if it is big and in the middle. Of the millions of photographs taken on any given day, most of them probably have a centrally positioned subject that the photographer does not want us to miss. Paradoxically, it is usually something we already know about; we know immediately why the photographer wants us to look at it, and the image merely reaffirms its importance. Mark Purdom's *Under* photographs each have a conspicuous object placed slap-bang in the middle of the frame, but it is by no means clear why it is there, or even, perhaps, what it is. The images are enigmatic. They invite speculation and require time. We begin to see not just the 'what' but the 'how'; not only what is shown, but the showing. While they all appear to represent the same kind of thing, it is more accurate to say that they all reflect the same pattern of seeing. And it is a kind of seeing that surreptitiously prises open social as well as pictorial conventions and hierarchies.

The ostensible subject of the photographs is a specific place, or type of place; neither purely urban nor rural; a forested, forgotten space, where BMX enthusiasts have established elaborate

trails to pursue their sport outside of mainstream society; on the edge and at the edges; a marginal space for a marginal activity. Such spaces can be described as 'liminal' or 'in-between', and have accrued a new importance with the rise of (loosely speaking) post-modernist theory since the 1960s – a breaking down of the hierarchies that arise from binary patterns of thinking or choices between opposing options, a muddying of the stark simplicity of black and white with shades of grey. The trouble with this process is that it does not necessarily reveal anything interesting about liminal spaces other than the fact that they are liminal – and that 'fact' in itself becomes questionable, for whenever something is identified as a 'space between', as 'neither one thing nor the other', it has immediately grown out of the condition ascribed to it, and become (even if only temporarily) one thing rather than another. (Logic would suggest, in any case, that spaces between things must be as numerous and conspicuous and familiar as the things they are between.) Artists, at least since the Realist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, have often enacted a similar ritual, drawing attention to neglected or mundane aspects of society – and they have often done so in a manner that is highly effective and compelling. Purdom's *Under* photographs, however, operate in a slightly different way. He does not so much draw attention to the presence or activities of a peripheral social milieu, as select and isolate fragments of that milieu, and capture moments in which it is not actually active.

At the centre of many of the photographs are steep-sided jumps made from compacted earth, which provide the thrills and spills of the BMX trails, or sometimes awkward buildings and seats – places to congregate. Purdom's images were made during the off-season, when no one was about and when the jumps are covered with mats to keep them solid and dry during the damp winter. Presented in this way, the earth constructions have an oddness or foreignness about them, a sense of loneliness and absurdity; their function is veiled, made obscure. They look like small huts or temporary homes, and one has the peculiar feeling of something or somebody being concealed within – of wanting to get around to the other side to find a door or window or anything that can tell us more. These maddeningly obdurate objects are seemingly immune to narrative – and yet they resist too any conventional notion of aesthetic beauty. Beauty, or the picturesque, has been displaced from the centre of the image to the edges – a fringe of pastoral England, leaves and snow, shifting shades of brown and green and grey. Our eyes are shuttled back and forth between the idyllic and the uncompromisingly functional, but continually confounded by the stillness, bluntness and outlandishness of the central constructions.

The nineteenth-century art critic and proto-environmentalist John Ruskin was perturbed by some of the technological developments of his time, and especially did not like trains because, he said, they turned people into parcels, whizzing

them from one place to another so fast that they could not contemplate the beauty of the landscape. Riding a BMX over elaborate trails and hair-raising jumps must require intense concentration, but directed towards frenetic physical action rather than the surrounding scenery. In Purdom's photographs, such action is invoked but absent. Or it is subordinated to contemplation. But that contemplation is itself complicated by the suggestion of action, and by the active way in which we scan and read the images. The photographs seem to have built into them a tension or dance between doing and looking. Moreover, while they do not show the purpose for which the landscape has been altered in such a strange manner, the errant or marginal activities that occur there are paralleled in the making of the images themselves – that is, the method of showing stands in for what is not shown. The most intriguing formal (aesthetic or visual) qualities of the photographs are the ones that are not formal in the other sense of the word (the sense in which people dress formally in order to follow social conventions or create an impression). In other words, the images exude variation and irregularity, not only in the eccentricity of the human-made objects, but in the immense detail of leaves and mud and twisted branches, and the awkward fit between the landscape and its use. Purdom's art is about small and simple things presented in such a way that they take a good deal of looking. His photographs ask us to consider why we are prepared to spend time looking at one thing rather than another.

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