

Sarah Dobai Short Story Piece

JOHN SLYCE

"...the discontinuous world of symbols plunges into the story of the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence."

Roland Barthes, from *Rhetoric of the Image*

In *Short Story Piece*, 2005, Sarah Dobai projects some fifty still images onto a darkened wall of a gallery. These are set in three alternating and distinct sequences – each comprising a series of articulated moments, or scenes framed by a domestic setting. *Short Story Piece* is at once a highly theatrical, literary and photographic project. Its concern is to cast light into the dark, murky spaces of first a studio, then a gallery, and ultimately the subjectivities of the characters involved both internally and externally in the piece.

Dobai has long created scenarios – sketches, outlines, or models of an expected or a supposed relay of events – that unfold and develop in a dialogue between a space, or site, and the actions or often in-action of subjects located therein. Since the later half of the 1990s, her work has been deeply immersed in accessing the realms of lived experience and the everyday through the dramatic potential of a seemingly naturalistic photograph. While still actively exploring the social and psychical relations between subjects and their environments through photography, Dobai's practice has increasingly taken on a greater and more profound literary dimension to the point where, in *Short Story Piece*, she is on the threshold of attempting to write with light.

While this is, of course, more my understanding or appreciation of Dobai's practice of photography than her own, her methods of working have indeed sprung from the interstices and productive tensions between the media and formats of still photography and the moving images of film. She continues to work with and direct actors – a few of which reappear across her works and projects – before a camera in her studio. The sets she constructs there are easily broken and comprised of detailed fragments of furniture, costume and props. Dobai's desired goal here is to build a coherent series of intensely dramatic scenarios that can join to form an atmospheric totality and yet still be productive of multiple narrative outcomes. A strength of Sarah Dobai's practice of photography is that she creates powerfully dramatic images drenched in the theatrical which remain open rather than closed down in their meanings. That she is able to do so without her work lapsing into the theatrical ambiguity or mannerist absorption of much contemporary photography owes a great deal to the way she consistently sets her explorations of psychical relations between a subject and its setting or environment within a social frame.

Short Story Piece stands, in many respects, as a summary of Dobai's working methods and her practice to date while suggesting future points of departure and development. The directed or staged images she has made for the piece are constructed from the varied and interior points-of-view of the characters contained within – so much so that it can be said these images, in the main, picture the subjectivities of the characters enacted. Aristotle was the first of many to recognise that there

might be actions without characters, but not characters without action. The autonomous components of *Short Story Piece* – directed scenario or image and the individual actors at work – come together as a whole by dint of a palpably raw and errant atmosphere created through characters without names and every one a hero of their scene. Their actions are the Ur-act of major articulations of praxis – desire, communication, and struggle – which form the very structure of narrative. The realism unleashed in the series is performative rather than merely descriptive.

Dobai emphasises the paradigmatic structure of narrative repeatedly deploying paired positions for her actors to struggle: *Short Story Piece*: Subject/Object, Donor/Receiver, Helper/Opponent. The ties that bind such binary positions – domestic, familial, strong and yet always already vulnerable – mother to daughter, so too father to son run the permutations of these relations. The overall structure of *Short Story Piece* formally mirrors that above as Dobai breaks the intensity of these nearly hallucinatory interior images with autumnal exterior location shots. These too are prone to the play of reversals at play in the interior images through their repeated metaphors of water, glass, ice and light. The exterior location – which would most normally read as 'straight' – now feel strange in their construction of a window-like view onto the world outside. It is within the fiction that the viewer feels at home. In this imagination and reality do not stand different and opposed to the other, but join to serve as our only and necessary angel.

The seriality of *Short Story Piece* is spread across imbricated sequences: the first of which is a somewhat slow unfolding of scenes; the second focuses more closely on frequent reversals of structure or metaphor; while the third is left open, best defined and completed by each individual viewer. The series is itself a psychological space animated by creative tensions and trauma. The domestic dilemma of desire, communication, and struggle shadows our every move at home and away. The light each may bring to our productively plural readings of Sarah Dobai's *Short Story Piece* will generate redemptive possibilities through sheer wealth and range of outcomes that are not only potentially also indeed possible. The end of her piece – like that of our fiction – remains to be written in the light of our own actions.

John Slyce, Portfolio, 2005