

SARAH DOBAI

AN INTERVIEW BY MARK DURDEN



Mark Durden. One of the key characteristics of your work seems to be its relation to the cinema. Could we begin with the cinema and its importance to your way of working. You do not take photographs or make films by going out into the world, but construct and stage-manage situations, deploying models/actors. What led you to this way of working?

Sarah Dobai. My very early work did look to cinema quite strongly. Pieces like *Door* (1997) or *Couple* (1998) took scenarios that are familiar from industrial dramas on TV or in mainstream films. I took these common and highly recognisable scenarios like a couple in a bed and re-staged them in my own terms. By putting these scenarios together and photographing them outside of an industrial context I wanted to re-introduce something intimate. My recent work has moved away from this conceptual relation to cinema but still looks to filmmaking in the manner of its production. Having said that I see my work as absolutely grounded in the everyday and in the business of trying to picture something of how we live our lives today.

*Door* (1997)  
*Couple* (1998)

M.D. Constructed or staged photography is often seen in opposition to documentary. Your emphasis on your work being grounded in the everyday is intriguing in this respect, as it suggests a closer relationship to documentary.

S.D. I suppose this reflects how I position my work in relation to realism. I don't see documentary photography and studio-based photography having a polarised and oppositional relation to each other. My work recently featured in an exhibition *Theatres of the Real*, curated by David Green and Joanna Lowry. That exhibition presented the work of various contemporary photographers including Nigel Shafran, Clare Strand, Sarah Pickering and Mitra Tabrizian in the context of the history of documentary photography and looked at the way in which staging in front of a camera has always been intrinsic to its practice.

The 2008 exhibition at Tate Modern, *Street and Studio*, explored the dual traditions of street and studio photography. Though that exhibition included a lot of complex and

multi-faceted work by major photographers like August Sander and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, in the main it characterised street photography as documentary and studio photography as constructed. To me doing this is reductive and overlooks a lot of what is really going on in the work.

M.D. What kind of relationship do you have with the actors or models during a photographic shoot or filming? You have spoken of looking for something between "the enacted and the unposed". Could you expand upon this and say how you achieve it?

S.D. That comment about looking for something between enacted and unposed was made in relation to my recent series of photographic works *Studio/ Location Photographs* (2009). In that series I am interested in the way an image shifts quite radically between when the model is openly acknowledging the presence of the camera and when they are not. The former relates more to the tradition of portraiture and is in a sense more honest about the conditions of the



production of the image, the latter is a more illusionistic way of working, creating a *mise-en-scène*. My work over recent years has moved back and forth between these approaches and that's something I'm thinking about with a new film I'm working on.

The way that I work with actor/ models starts with the process of casting. I advertise and often the people that respond are non-professional actor/ models at an early stage of their careers. This suits me, as they tend to have a less detached relationship to the work and tend to give more of themselves.

Making a photograph first involves a test shoot and then one or two further shoots. This process allows for some degree of improvisation after which the nature of what gets pictured gets refined, unnecessary elements are stripped away. The models' sense of performing recedes through their familiarity with the situation, it gets internalised and naturalised by them through the shooting process.

**M.D. In *Studio/Location Photographs* you shift between photographs of empty shopping mall spaces, rich in social information but lacking protagonists, before which we are aware of the materials that make up these social spaces, the sensuousness of different surfaces, and the more minimal settings of the constructed spaces in the studio, in which models/actors function to give life and social information. You use people of different ages and ethnicity and arrange them in varied positions in the spaces, lying down, standing, seated etc. Could you say something about this deployment of figures in these settings? It is as if they are treated like formal elements within a pictorial composition.**

S.D. In the studio I made a modular set that loosely referred to the locations pictured. Where the actor/models stood and how was dictated by the architecture of the set itself not by formal concerns. This echoes the way in which the design of public space in the city dictates peoples' use — isolated corners invite

illicit rendezvous between work colleagues, alcoves, a place for a homeless person to rest, a quiet passageway, an anonymous place to wait. In developing *Studio/Location Photographs* I spent a lot of time in shopping malls in England and in France where I was doing a residency. Looking around different malls for places to shoot, I observed how people behave in these places, how a lot of what goes on is nothing to do with the business of shopping. Though malls are designed to encourage consumption, desire and material aspiration, a lot of the people that go to these places are not mainstream consumers, they are teenagers, pensioners, homeless people, people for whom it becomes a kind of refuge. How the models were pictured within the set really came primarily from my observations of people in the malls I visited.

I think I first got interested in shopping malls because their heightened atmosphere reminded me of one of my shoots. Like in a studio shoot the mall is a highly constructed and skillfully lit



environment and there's an odd sense of time suspended. I was also drawn to the mall as a location as it's one of the most common kinds of public spaces today.

The design of malls are all about the most seductive possible display of products, but when we go there it is also ourselves who are on display. Like all public spaces there is a lot of looking going on between the people. In *Studio/Location Photographs* I wanted to use the space of the shopping mall to think about that identification between looking, display and commodity. It's something that Walter Benjamin talks about in *The Arcades Project* in which he describes the covered shopping streets of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the dynamic which develops between the location and the studio photographs I wanted to draw a parallel between people's uneasy relation to public space and the situation of a model in a photo shoot. For this reason, though *Studio/Location Photographs* takes it cues from

real life, the photographs also talk about the context of the shoot itself; the models are barefoot and the joins in the set are visible.

**M.D. You seem to be more interested in rather minimal or understated emotional states, the sense of something being withheld rather than theatrically expressed/released. Your actors/models always remain passive protagonists. There is a lot to do with waiting, ennui and boredom in terms of your characters and the situations/locations you put them in.**

S.D. What's going on psychologically with the protagonists in the work is a matter of interpretation – yours is one reading. In my photographs and films the characters do not emotionally express their psychological state but how we see them behave tells you that in a very straightforward way. I think the passivity of my subjects comes from thinking about the situations people find themselves in and how these are often informed not by their own will but by their background, psychological or

physical makeup, luck and other things beyond their control.

**M.D. So you are interested in the problem of agency in terms of your models?**

S.D. Yes, I think I am. When I was making *Model 280* (2006), the two screen video work commissioned by Kettles Yard, Cambridge, I became aware of the films of Robert Bresson, films like *Pickpocket* or *Mouchette*. In these films, the psychology and behaviour of his protagonists is dictated by their circumstances. Unlike Hollywood films in which the plot is all about the agency of the lead characters to influence the plot that unfolds, in a film like *Mouchette* what happens to her is decided by factors outside of her control. This very circumstantial treatment of the characters in Bresson's films coincides with my own. With Bresson the passivity of his protagonists came out of his Jansenist religious beliefs, with me I think it indicates a kind of politics.

**Model 280** (2 pairs) (2006)  
Stills from 16mm single screen projection.  
Duration 6'42"  
Commissioned by Kettles Yard.



**M.D. Model 280, with its familiar scenario of a nuclear family group fixed in a car, seems to speak of entrapment, of repressed desires and tensions among the protagonists. Can you say something about the use of the family car journey. There is little sense of the freedom that was associated with the car in its post-war heyday.**

S.D. In *Model 280* I wanted to think about the family car journey as a commonly used scenario in fictional dramas in the cinema or in literature but also something that people have strong memories of from childhood. I also got interested in the way novelists and filmmakers are drawn to the car journey as a way to characterise their protagonists' relationship to their social landscape. This is how the car journey functions in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Truman Capote's *In Cold*

*Blood* or David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. The passiveness of the car journey and the way that you are closed off from what's outside makes it an interesting place to create a portrait of someone.

Going on a car journey, which you might think of as a dynamic thing, is in fact a very passive experience, it is a period of sitting and waiting to arrive. This inactivity echoes the conditions of actors in a film shoot, where the shoot itself puts them in a kind of limbo. The film installation isn't about creating an illusion of a moving vehicle in a landscape. It is about stripping that scenario down to its bare bones, separating the images of the interior of the car and a passing landscape in the space of the gallery. I was interested in the way that despite the lack of illusionism the two screens nevertheless get put together by the viewer to

create different narrative possibilities.

**M.D. Time is integral to your films and photographs. There is the drawn out, attenuated time in your films, and then the time of the tableau. Could you say something about this concern with duration and time in your films and photographs, how they differ and relate?**

S.D. I suppose because I'm coming to the moving image from photography the films play around between time and timelessness and between the still and the moving image. This might seem an anomaly given the nature of the medium but in a sense reflects how artists' films generally get shown: in a gallery on a continuous loop. The scenes pictured are trapped in time – where beginning and ending is less important than the loop itself. I guess



I'm more concerned with how something changes and develops for the viewer not through the action or narrative of what's shown but through the way our experience of a moving image changes and intensifies through the accumulation of viewing time. I think the photographs have a much stronger sense of coming from a passage of time, of what might come before or after the image pictured. But in the photographs time appears elastic, at once momentary and slow, which comes about, I guess, through my interest in picturing something of people's inner lives.

**M.D.** In your 16mm film *Nettlecombe* (2007) we have the stationary fixed view of a landscaped garden, animated by the wind that shakes the vegetation and blows across the water. All this is artificially done, with wind machines, etc. In the earlier 16mm film *Yard* (2001) a fixed camera records a curtain of rain falling from a roof and into a small courtyard. The film's temporality is in accordance with the length of the downpour. The scene is also animated by human figures, a woman leaves the building opposite and a male enters, though at different times. This event is minimal and incidental to the primary visual spectacle of the pouring rain. The formal element dominates, just as it did with Structural filmmakers. In keeping with the formalist context of such a relation, the rain could be

seen to allude to the movement of film through the projector. Is this formalist aspect important? At the same time, in terms of narrative, there is your interest with the role of these films in terms of atmosphere and the narrative space of the landscape/location.

*S.D. Yard* was shot in the courtyard of my studio building. In order to make the stage-managed rainstorm visible it had to be backlit and shot at night, so that the image is of a curtain of falling droplets of light against the dark space of the yard. This necessary use of light put the work in a very particular relationship to the medium of film and because I was interested in this I decided to shoot it on 16mm rather than video.

A big part of my thinking around *Yard* and later around *Nettlecombe* lay in my interest in creating an illusion of something and then breaking that down during the work. Mainstream filmmakers use weather effects as a discreet way of manipulating their audience, think of the continual rain in Robert Altman's *Magnolia* or the wind in the famous scene with the couple in the park in Antonioni's *Blow Up*. In both *Yard* and *Nettlecombe* I wanted to isolate such an effect, pulling it away from a plot-driven context. I suppose I wanted to use these filmic scenarios to think about belief in relation to film and art.

Around when I was making *Nettlecombe* I became aware of Structural filmmakers in Britain and the US in the 70's and I realized that my approach had a relationship to theirs – so that the formal aspect of these works is something that I became more conscious of. In *Nettlecombe* however the concern with time and timelessness was there from the start. I was attracted to the location in a private estate in deepest Somerset as it was so unnaturally still and seemed quite unchanged by time. The film pictures the pleasure garden of the estate, which is situated in a sheltered valley and has been designed as carefully as a landscape in a painting.

There was an uncanny feeling when we brought all the paraphernalia of filmmaking to this place that felt so untouched by modernity. Like *Yard* it was shot on 16mm. The decision to shoot it on film reflected the fact that it was achieved through recording a kind of in-situ performance with wind machines and ropes rather than through any post-production trickery. In the one-day shoot we used the trees and bushes in the garden like puppets in the set-like space of the garden. There was an absurdity to it like trying to animate a photograph.

*Nettlecombe* stills (3) (2007)  
Stills from 16mm single screen projection. Duration 7'26"  
Commissioned by Film London





Yellow Corridor (2008)







Mary (2009)





Sci-Fi Corridor (2009)





Keiji (2008-9)