Eileen Quinlan

Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, USA

Looking at an Eileen Quinlan photograph is like peering into a kaleidoscope - a disorienting and unstable arrangement of colours, reflections, textures and planes. Her show 'Nature Morte', however, which incorporated shots of memorial bouquets in Père-Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, served as a reminder that she has always viewed her photographs as still lifes - not intuitively generated abstractions but images of inanimate objects and lighting effects.

Quinlan re-photographed some of the cemetery shots in the studio, where she caused the blossoms to splinter or multiply in mirrors like monstrous crystals. Still lifes, of course, have often included representations of fresh flowers, whether as celebrations of plenitude or reminders of mortality. These garlands and bouquets, however, are made of stone and synthetic materials, which are at once cold to the touch and - though they may become worn - resist decay. The images evoke death but also acquire a life of their own, recalling Roland Barthes' meditations on photography in *Camera Lucida* (1980).

The first photograph in the show, *After Winter* (2004-10) - an unusually straightforward, if moody, shot of silvery artificial flowers before a tombstone - signaled something different from the hermetic abstractions one expects to see in Quinlan's work. Several obvious departures initiated a dialogue between her various working methods: she shot the cemetery images on location, whereas other works continued her usual practice of creating contained installations in her studio. The show was laced with overtly figurative imagery: gelatin silver prints outnumbered the smattering of lush colour photographs.

Assuming the guise of a beguiling novice magician, Quinlan sometimes drops hints as to her process - through visibly scratched surfaces or ragged mirror edges that don't quite fit together, for example - when she documents installations in her studio. But she's equally likely to craft stubborn enigmas, when she deploys such illusionistic paraphernalia as mirrors, strobe lights, smoke and coloured gels. Her palette, lighting and materials also frequently echo commercial design - such as stock photographs or perfume and liquor adverts - but their polished allure surfaces in her work as a form of disturbance. Quinlan's preoccupation with examining how photographs work indicates that she usually eschews digital manipulation or darkroom wizardry, but in 'Nature Morte' she allowed some chemical distortion, such as a cerulean stain that courses down the shot of a trompe-l’œil garland in *You'll Never Follow Me* (2008-10) - as if venturing out of her studio necessitated further meditation.

The connection to mortality extends beyond funerary imagery to more playful or accidental
echoes. Some photographs recall the look of 19th-century mourning cards and spiritualist photographers' visual hokum. *The Raft* (2010) seems to depict a piece of ruffled fabric whose centre has been eaten away, leaving a shape like a diaphanous white frame floating against a black field. In *A Ground in the Air* (2010) a sheet of some less identifiable material, perforated with two face-like ovals and divided into shaded areas resembling patches of aquatint in Francisco Goya's etchings, hangs in front of a grey field that is mottled as if shot with ectoplasm. A whiff of the morbid also emanates from imperfections - redolent of dust, age and failure - that Quinlan allows to mar her images. At the same time, one is always brought back to the freshness of her project, her ability to unsettle the way we look at photographs.

Quinlan's photographs make one want to look. *The Things as They Are* (2010), for example, which comprises three overlapping planes that reflect or are imprinted with a woven texture, is a maddeningly absorbing image - absurd and cerebral, grubby but also perfectly composed, mysterious yet matter-of-fact. Elsewhere in the show, a larger photograph, *Everything Moves, Everything Shimmers* (2010), deflated that fascination by offering a more flaccid, but also more legible, arrangement of similar materials. Meanwhile, it moodily revealed its own vexing spatial conundrums.

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