

# Captions for *Bathers*\*

A text by Rodrigo Orrantia

Photography is the most simple, and also the most sophisticated of human inventions. On one hand it derives from the observation of nature, and is based on demonstrable laws of physics and chemistry. But it is also complex and uniquely human, as it would not be able to exist without the powers of abstraction and imagination. It has always fascinated me, how a medium that is so firmly rooted in the material world can be such a powerful tool in the exploration of the transcendental.

As you walk into the space of the gallery, you'll notice some artworks on the walls. Also some artworks on the floor. Take a moment to look at the wooden floorboards, the exposed steel beams, the windows and skylights, and the light coming in. And the people in the room (or perhaps the absence of people). They are all as important as the artworks.

In the main room a mysterious object, part photograph, part sculpture, a *photographic object*. A photograph that is not an image of the world but an object meant to interact with the world around it, especially with the person who observes it.

These photographic objects are a catalyst for spontaneous connections between the architecture and space of the gallery and the actions of the people in the room, be they the performers or the observing audience. In this sense the works are a device: a photograph (in essence), but also a mirror, a stream, and an infinite void. An exciting reminder of the possibilities of the photographic medium, walking the room one can feel a more immediate sensory connection with photography, perhaps more akin to what one would experience with sculpture.

I can see how Tom Lovelace has become much more conscious of the capacity of art (and especially of photography) to create illusions, and is now fixated with creating *instances* where the audience can experience the threshold between the material world and our perception of it.

## Instances

The dark surface of the works either reflects light or absorbs it. This is an essential difference of opposites: reflection closes, marks the limit. Absorption opens, creates a void. Whether these photographic objects reflect or absorb light has to do with you, the viewer, the light sources of this gallery you are in, and the viewing angle of the work. Both reflection and absorption are powerful metaphors to explore Tom Lovelace's works.

First instance of reflection (black and gold): A photograph of water is a play on a double reflection: the reflection on the surface of the water captured by the camera, and the reflection on the surface of the paper where this photograph is printed on. It is this double surface that prevents us from seeing into the depths of the water.

First instance of absorption: Tom Lovelace looking at George Seurat's *Bathers at Asnières* at the National Gallery, where Lovelace used to work. As the main figure in the painting (also the man in the straw hat), Lovelace is absorbed in thought.

The performers in the space are Lovelace's bathers. I can only imagine them at this time, sitting by the window looking into the gallery, their thoughts lost in the surface of the work on the floor.

I originally thought Seurat's bathers were looking at the water, but now know they were looking at the scene on the other side of the river – outside the space of the canvas – also painted by Seurat under the title *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Standing on Lovelace's riverbank, the audience creates a third scene, observing and being observed.

Second instance of reflection: In 1599 the Italian Baroque master Caravaggio painted his celebrated *Narcissus* – a young man lost in the gaze of his own reflection – about two hundred and fifty years before Seurat painted his *Bathers*, and just about four hundred years before Tom Lovelace's first experiments with photograms and reflective surfaces. I am excited by the fact that the enchantment has remained the same: what is it about this distorted reflection looking back at us on the surface of the water that is so mesmerising, so mysterious?

Third instance of reflection (and absorption): Lockdown. Tom Lovelace is looking through the camera and out the window, photographing reflections on the surface of rainwater on the garden rooftop. His daughter, Dora, is looking at herself on the screen of a computer during a home-schooling zoom session. Although she is looking at her reflection through the eyes of the camera and inside the space of the screen (as opposed to her reflection on the surface of the screen), the effect is the same. She has lost track of the conversation around her, and has become entranced with her own image looking back at her.

Second instance of absorption: Twenty years ago, Tom Lovelace lying on his student room bed, looking at the white ceiling, thinking about bad photography. Photographing the empty ceiling: an image of nothing, the epitome of bad photography. It is an empty rectangle but also a mysterious black object on the strip of film. One thing I learnt from analogue photography is that they are opposite equals: pure light and total darkness.

On reflection as illusion: On this instance the reflection points to a strip of fluorescent light, placed opposite the work. Standing in front of it, the viewer obscures the light source, but strangely the reflection does not disappear. It might seem a simple trick, a photographic sleight of hand, but it is a far more unsettling gesture.

Final instance (On understanding Tom Lovelace's *Bathers*): One constant in art, and especially in photography, is that it needs to be understood. John Berger writes in his book *Understanding a Photograph* that photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious. Although he is thinking of actual photographs of 'things' taken at a given moment, he is not mistaken about the idea of photography as evidence of observation, especially when it is only at a blank ceiling, or at total darkness. I am trying to summon Berger in my dreams and ask him what he thinks about the works on this show.

*\* I set myself the task to write captions for a series of works, which, at this time, probably still don't exist; Tom Lovelace described them to me (or told me about the ideas and anecdotes behind them) in preparation for this show. As with the tradition of captioning photographic images, you can choose to read them along with you whilst observing the works, or perhaps leave the reading for later, if you are reading at all. To respond to Lovelace's way of working, I decided not to number or identify the correspondence of the captions with the works in the exhibition. It is you, the reader, who can connect both worlds, and imbue the works with meaning.*