Images Unfixed
Anne Collier
The Modern Institute

The word 'control' keeps coming to mind – for contradictory reasons. 'Control' is an obvious aesthetic virtue of Anne Collier's photographs. They are, in virtually every way, models of astonishing formal restraint, even as they frame – and elegantly flaunt – reliable visual stimuli for potentially uncontrolled desire.

Collier is a fastidious manager of already-existing pictures, but without *quite* proposing a practice of artistic 'appropriation' in the manner of the 'Pictures Generation' artists she has learnt much from (Collier has referred to the work of such artists as Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and Louise Lawler as 'effectively the first contemporary art that I was aware of'). Her works are full of photographic products and placements: piles of album sleeves tidily positioned against white walls; centre-spreads from magazines held open for the camera; postcards, shown front and back. Always, albeit in a judicious range of ways, the images she reflects on show evidence of age: her subjects are often from the realm of the antique-modern, offering diverse glimpses of pop culture's recent past. Collier draws from an expansive archive of outmoded mass-media material, generally focusing on slickly-produced, period-styled shots from the 1970s and 1980s. She studies advertorial spreads from fashion-glossies, creates radically-reduced edits of features from borderline-sleazy amateur photography magazines, constructs compact displays from collections of second-hand or long-cherished vinyl records, foregrounding the faded glamour of former music and movie stars while self-consciously fetishising the lasting aura of famous posters and sleeve designs. (One earlier series focused on the once-accepted mainstream allure of smoking, centring on album covers showing such stylishly *controlled* pop personas as Brian Ferry, Grace Jones and Serge Gainsbourg posing with an essential, image-completing cigarette).

As she concentrates on such historical imagery, Collier both asserts the material time-worn actuality of each selected picture and situates her photographic objects within spaces of icy ahistorical emptiness. Seemingly re-shot under laboratory-like studio conditions, her excerpts from this vast archive of popular desire exist in an abstracted environment, located within a strictly *controlled* and non-distracting contextual setting, detached from any specificities of time and place. Sometimes, as in a series of three related images included in the Modern Institute exhibition, we see carefully considered and closely compared variations on how her images might occupy such non-specific space. In one, a small black-and-white photo of an open eye is held up by the arranging, controlling hand of the artist (or the hand of someone else, acting under the artist's directorial control), against a plane of perfect, uninterrupted white space. Nothing else interferes. But nearby, another work shows the same small snapshot held in readiness to be placed into an empty photo-album; and then, in a juxtaposed, alterative version, we see 'the

Installation view by Ruth Clark showing *Woman With A Camera (Persona)* and *Woman With A Camera (Postcard, Verso Recto)*

eye' finally inserted into the album, with the guiding hand no longer visible. These photographs are the outcomes of a methodically controlled self-referential process. And yet there is surely something provisional about the group outcome. Each individual piece proposes a means of *fixing* the chosen picture in a particular way, a precise steadying of the eye and the image in space (and in time – a photo album preserves the image for posterity). Our own eye, of course, won't necessarily stay at rest – and so there's no simple resolution. There is just enough resulting agitation in these measured, open-ended positionings of the image to allow us, perhaps, to recall Roland Barthes often-quoted aphorism that 'society is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it.'

Such madness might also be evident in the erotic convulsions implied by the presence of numerous naked and semi-naked bodies in Collier's works. But if the disconcerting seductions of these images simultaneously stage and, in their pronounced formal detachment, also frustrate the promise that restraint can become undone, that control can be lost, they equally point to the related – and classically pornographic – fantasy of *gaining* control. Collier frequently plays on (male) photography's desired mastery over a (female) fantasy object, in unsettling ways. She highlights how photography violently disassembles bodies, fragmenting elements of the female form (breasts, lips) for intensified erotic effect. But in combination with such examples of photography's tendency to fetishise, separate, exlude and define, are other, differently disconcerting counter-arguments.

A key recurring subject, for instance, is the female figure with a camera – represented at the Modern Institute with two quite different images of women photographers. One centres on a found tourist postcard from Kenya, in which a semi-clad African woman in traditional costume holds up a camera to take a picture, pointing it towards the viewer, but in a manner that leaves her face obscured. In the other, we see the Norwegian actress Liv Ullman in a promo still from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, and here, once again, the protagonist's face is partly obscured as she points the camera in our direction. Both photographs – or both photographs of photographs – contain potent, ambiguous images. They are exciting and unnerving all at once (exciting, no doubt, because they are unnerving). Add renewed awareness, then, of Collier's presence with the camera – gazing, selecting, positioning – and we find ourselves in a still more powerful photographic drama: one that controls – and unfixes – images to truly remarkable effect.

Declan Long

Installation view by Ruth Clark showing (l. to r.) *Album (Eye) #2, Album (Eye) #1, Eye #1*

Album (Eye) #2 (2014)

Long, Declan: 'Images Unfixed' (review of Anne Collier, The Modern Institute, Aird's Lane, Glasgow), The Source, 2014