

## Caroline May: The Killing Pictures

ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives Los Angeles

26 October to 26 January

Close to downtown Los Angeles and founded in 1952, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives is the oldest existing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organisation in the US and claims to have the largest collection of LGBT material in the world. For such an august institution, it is a bit of a cultural secret, and I was mildly surprised to discover not only the venue itself but also the exhibition space within. In one room it was presenting a selection of work by British photographer Caroline May, whose work was last seen in London at the Freud Museum a few years ago.

As all the work at ONE has an LGBT theme, I didn't automatically dismiss what at first glance appeared to be a collection of bland landscapes. Arranged both on the walls of the exhibition space and on tables in the middle of the room, the photographs were taken in various parks in London and in one specific spot in Central Park, New York. The few Central Park images were arranged on one wall and each contained a single, semi-nude male figure. Entitled *The Ramble, Central Park*, 2006, its location as a famous gay male cruising ground is revealed, and the solitary man in the pictures is an easily recognisable gay archetype. Gay theme thereby received and understood. But, not surprisingly, there is more to it than that. Having stepped in from West Adams Boulevard in aggressively urban central LA, I was more receptive than usual to the transformative power of a quiet exhibition space. Drawn at first to the slim, muscular body partly displayed in these pictures, confrontationally flaunting his sexuality in a public – and therefore assumed to be heterosexual – environment, I recognised familiar theatrical images of masculinity parsing the landscapes. Familiar from other exhibitions as well as from all kinds of leafy public spaces all around the world, gay culture has long flourished, albeit discreetly, in parks, which probably isn't surprising as they are environments for leisured display. Whether it is riders comparing bikes, proud parents showing off babies and buggies, or men with biceps, it is hard to think of a place where people are less ostentatious, or less intensely observed. The few pictures from 'The Ramble' series quite frankly do what similar LGBT-themed work has done in that the overtly sexualised man depicted 'confronts and reclaims' public space by merely being present in the landscape. What stops these pictures simply retreading the same old formula is the way the photographer has presented the man who appears as the subject in each. May has distilled an essence of relaxed self-confidence and intense sexuality from this man, who carries the casually magnetic presence of the off-duty porn stars photographed so magnificently by Larry Sultan in his 'Valley' series. By successfully making everything in these images – the landscape, the light, the

composition – hinge on him, May catches the drama and palpable erotic charge of a chance alfresco encounter.

The rest of the images on display had no human presence, and therefore offered no clues as to potential narrative content besides the fact that they were all taken in London parks. What appeared to be studies of trees or rural landscapes were occasionally marked by sections of buildings given no more prominence than their surroundings. All were black and white, and some had colour filters (lilac, yellow etc) which I took as narrative leads but which proved indecipherable. My initial response was mild irritation, particularly at one large study of a tree cropped halfway up – wouldn't the entire tree surely have made a better composition than the half-tree presented? But peaceful contemplation won out – this was a gallery space, after all – and I slowly viewed the photographs framed and hung on the wall, or laid beneath a sheet of glass on trestle tables as if for forensic examination.

And examine them I did, like David Hemmings's 1960s photographer in *Blow Up* after finding that initial body in one of his prints. The mild irony of this traveller, thousands of miles away, determined to find the gay subtext in images of my local London parks wasn't lost on me. It finally dawned that the apparently haphazard crops of possibly important compositional details could mean the images were to be read as documentary records of specific locations, so I went in search of explanatory text. The big clue, of course, was in the title: 'The Killing Pictures'. For this series of London park 'landscapes', May accessed London police records of homophobic murders over a recent ten-year period, and each picture was a stark record of the crime sites.

Armed with this knowledge, each image became a scene of brooding malevolence and horror. The trees and bushes that had previously given away so little were now imbued with heightened tension as mute witnesses to fatal violence and cruelty. These hitherto 'bland landscapes' were suddenly more loaded and confrontational than the half-naked man in the Central Park 'Ramble' images and, while making a very blunt yet somehow curiously subtle point about homophobia, also more effectively denounced the myth of photographic objectivity. To view these pictures is to feel just how mercurial are the boundaries of documentary and fiction, distance and reality, presentation and deception.

Together these selections of work from two of May's photographic series affirmed the hidden LGBT histories that are everywhere in our unconsciously privileged heteronormative (by assumption) public spaces. Quietly banal urban landscapes are repositories of gay social activity, collective memory and, ultimately, trauma which has traditionally been hidden from sight and visible only to some members of this usually voiceless demographic. But to view them as a historic record is a mistake. As I write this, Ugandans are desperately calling on President Museveni not to sign the 'kill the gays' bill. Last December, India revived Section 377 of its penal code, a relic of colonialism dating from 1861 that criminalises same-sex activity. And the winter Olympics at Sochi is gathering a storm of international protest over Vladimir Putin's spiteful suppression of dissent, particularly last year's passing of a law that bans 'gay propaganda' and which has already seen a massive surge in anti-gay violence throughout Russia. May's photographs are a relevant and necessary reminder that vicious homophobia is not just a distant phenomenon but happens right here in our own comfortable killing fields. ■

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Caroline May  
*Untitled (Clapham Common #3)* 2011

