

Clarke, Chirs, *Sarah Jones: Photographs*,
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Exhibition Review

Sarah Jones: Photographs

National Media Museum, Bradford.
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Reviewed by Chris Clarke

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There's something missing here. In Sarah Jones's photographs, the unseen and the unsaid persist through a careful, formal staging of composition. Women and long-haired girls gaze absently off into the distance or peer out from underneath tables and beds. A lattice of vines and branches is barely perceptible against a void of opaque black. The pencil marks and traces of color on an otherwise blank wall outline the dimensions of a lost painting. The works carry a blind spot, a lack, that is both absent and implied.

An image of a couch, a horizontal swathe of vibrant red against a white field, is revealed to be set in a psychiatrist's office. And yet, there's nothing in the picture itself that indicates its purpose, no sign of the analyst, and no suggestion of the session's content or interpretation. The viewer has to look beyond the frame, to the accompanying label of *Analyst (Couch) (I)*, to the other photographs in the series and the gallery, and, as an adjunct to the main exhibition, to those selected by Jones from the museum's archive. The analyst's couch is seen to be the site of confession and confidentiality, and the double-sided nature of the confessional is reiterated in Jones's formal choices, in the cropping of the edges of the mattress and the stark, minimalist aesthetic. The central image, the subject, is literally cut off, in a gesture that recalls the abrupt interruption of the session in Lacanian psychoanalytical practice, a strategy intended to provoke association and contemplation. Conversely, the visual similarity of the photograph to nonrepresentational painting, to Rothko's color-fields in particular, points to those works' own ambitions toward the incommunicable, transcendental experience. These two, seemingly contradictory approaches recur in several other images in the exhibition.

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In *Arrangement (II)*, a close-up of (the same?) office bookshelf portrays several volumes of specialized psychoanalytical journals. At the uppermost edge, however, a glimpse of the subjective is visible in the letters of another title: "UDELAIRE." The professional and objective authority of the analyst is betrayed in their choice of Baudelaire's poetry, with its intimations of the flâneur, casually wandering and absorbing disparate bits of information, and losing himself in the masses. Positioned between two related photographs, Jones implies a comparable rupture of the self-contained object through these subtle allusions to other worlds, other locations.

Cove (virtual film studio) (I) makes this connection explicit. This photograph of a blue infinity cove, used for mapping in different backgrounds, is almost indistinguishable from the all-over monochromatic paintings of Yves Klein or Rothko (the horizon of the floor quite closely resembles the latter's blocks of color). It is, at once, truthful documentation and pure abstraction. There is also always the possibility of its transformation, into a landscape or city street or office space, and this capacity for illusion provides a neat analogy to Jones's own photographic practice, which hovers somewhere between the hermetic and the discursive. Or rather, it refuses to make a distinction.

In *The Fence (Passion Flower) (I)*, a dense thicket of flowers serves as a backdrop to a distracted female figure in jeans and T-shirt. The young woman looks away from the

camera, obstructing the view of the garden behind her. In the related photograph, *The Fence (Passion Flower) (II)*, she's been seamlessly removed, leaving only the setting behind. There are layers of obfuscation here: an intractable figure against an overgrowth of foliage enveloping a fence, and an equation between the psychological inscrutability of the woman and the impenetrable surface of the thicket. It is this tension that simultaneously encourages and deflects interpretation. The image compels the viewer to delve into the façade, to push against its various obstructions and barriers. In the upper corner of both pictures, a hole of dark-blue sky provides an aperture, which returns in other images: as a patch of skylight behind an arrangement of wild roses—*The Rose Gardens (display: II) (II)*, or as the open window of *The Living Room (I)*, symmetrically framing a heavy wooden table and a girl crawling out from underneath. Her presence suggests a possible breach of the ordered formalism of the interior, and the intrusion of messy, adolescent subjectivity into the classically composed. However, again, the figure's gaze refuses to look up, and her position is unexplained and ambiguous. The viewer is left to scramble up false trails and branches, run into dead ends and hopelessly navigate his or her way around a private code that never offers itself completely to a critical explanation. Their reading is unsettled, disturbed by the traces of a secret history, and a narrative fixed forever on the verge of meaning.