

# **Justin Spiers**

*Before There Was Hope*



**RDS Gallery**



**A Condensed Moral Discourse**

by Michael Greaves

***'Through a Glass Darkly'***

by Hilary Radner

Essays on the occasion of the exhibition

Justin Spiers

*Before There Was Hope*

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# Contents

Michael Greaves  
A Condensed Moral Discourse

Hilary Radner  
*'Through a Glass Darkly'*

Appendix  
Justin Spiers – Biographical Overview



## **A Condensed Moral Discourse** by Michael Greaves

Justin Spiers' exhibition *Before There Was Hope* comprises a suite of photographs that open charged dialogues concerning the relations of animal and human, primarily as regards the synthetic and natural states of the object(s) that are depicted. Selected from a growing archive, these works revisit photographic recordings made during 2010 in China where Spiers was on an Australian Council funded residency associated with Red Gate Gallery for a six-month period. Through experiences of daily life, Spiers became interested in the zoo as a site depicting the imbalance between animal nature and human usage of the animal as an object. During the residency Spiers visited a number of Chinese zoos, recording the animals on display and the artificial enclosures that housed them. This investigation built an extensive atlas of images that present the animal as inanimate, exploring the nature of the space and examining the shift in nature of the animal towards a use object for human consumption.

Drawn to the photographic moment initially in an aesthetic sense, Spiers becomes a collector of particularities that entangle the eye. Textures and barriers, such as cold surfaces, reflections and scored glass, are presented as active communicators in the image, on a par with the objects themselves. Colour, or a lack of colour in the monochromatic works, is also used as a discursive moment noting time and presence. These images are crafted, and manicured, with

much work done in post-production. They present as an ambiguous image, proposing a narrative that is not totally certain. Velvety, smooth blacks and lurid, often saccharine, colour palettes seduce the eye into the tight pictorial frame. This sensorial experience is challenged by a condensed moral discourse that is generated by competing images in the collection.

In two such works that reveal both this craft and this ambiguity, one depicts a photographer's background cloth strung up in an exterior scene adjacent to a wintering tree printed in colour, and the other a large parrot-like bird enclosed in a habitat diorama including a roosting tree. There is a connected sense of decay and stasis in both images, along with a perceptual 'fake', the diorama, adjacent to a natural element, the tree and the bird. Where does the 'fake' begin and end? What sparks an interest here in this proposed narrative is the objectification, use, and interchangeability of each element in silent repose. As in the work of Diane Arbus, these images never depict just horror or just beauty. Spiers cites Arbus as one of his earliest reference points for photography, and there is something of this relationship seen here. It occurs in the indexical 'bounce' involved in making such images. On one hand, this touches the object, but on the other hand, in the processing of the photograph in the darkroom or the computer, the ridged contextual arrangement is reorganised, and transcends the historic moment, representing a unique narrative game where the viewer enters into, and becomes a part of the frame.



## ***'Through a Glass Darkly'*** by Hilary Radner

The six pigment ink prints in the exhibition 'Before There Was Hope' are united by their concern with what students of André Bazin know as 'the ontology of the photographic image' and its relations with the 'real'. For Bazin, the photographic image, like the footprint, was indexical, in philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce's terms – that is, the trace of something 'real', bearing the marks of the phenomenological and material reality that it represents. In these terms, the photograph was proof above all that 'something' was 'there' once. The nature of that 'something' might be called into question, but the nature of the 'trace' as participating in an empirically based reality, its materiality, was not.

The digital image transformed the terms of debates around the photograph as an indexical sign given that 'digital' reproduction's relations with the 'once-was-there' evoked, for most, none of the certitude implied by earlier technologies. Spiers' set of photographs forces the viewer to question this earlier assumption with regard to the analog image by suggesting that the qualities of the image itself, and its reproduction as a print, mean that this same viewer can never see but 'through a glass darkly'.

Spiers deliberately shrouds the process by which the print has been produced. The only information offered is 'pigment print ink on cotton rag paper'. Whether the original source of the image was a transparency (a negative, for example), which was then scanned to produce the 'print' (from a digital file resulting from the scan), or

whether the 'print' originated as a digital file, remains unspecified. The term 'print' itself implies a certain ambiguity in that a digital print is not literally an 'imprint' from a plate or some other physical object, even a negative (as in the case of the analog camera), but is generated by a set of electronic instructions that exist independently, distinct from the object represented. Even a digital image on the screen has a mediated relationship to a print – with the digital files, as a set of electronic data the mediating point. There is no direct indexical connection with the material world represented – the traces of a specific moment and object in time are indirect and re-mediated, so that these exist only as virtual transformations.

Four of these images, all in black and white, foreground this ambiguity by photographing the glass pane behind which the animals depicted are located. The animal figure appears blurred and imperfectly apprehended behind the glass, itself often marred by water, imperfections, detritus, etc., giving the image a deceptively 'blurred' appearance, when it is actually the 'blur' that is the object represented. The presence of the glass as a visual barrier recalls the photographic process itself, the various physical intercessions, including the glass lens of the camera, that insert themselves between the viewer and the image before him or her.

These references to the photographic apparatus underline the distance separating the viewer and the animal depicted, whom the human viewer can approach only indirectly through the lens of camera. Elsewhere Jonathan Marshall, who collaborated on another series, intimates that neither he nor Justin ever felt that they

understood the animals that they represented. 'They are enigmas that in the end can only reflect back our own compromised gaze like a dull, opaque mirror'. Three of these images echo this sentiment in so far as the animal is at a distance – obscured by the physical barriers of its glass enclosure, paradoxically constructed to put the animal on display; however, one photograph breaks with this position – 'enclosure XVIII' – depicting a baboon behind glass, gazing soulfully out of the frame. Viewers are affected, despite the 'blurred effect', and comment on the sadness of this photograph (inevitably the most popular in the series) and the tragedy of the animal's condition. While the viewer is undoubtedly aware of the glass barrier and its references to the photographic process and the viewer's separation from the object viewed, this additional surface between the viewer and the baboon also serves to underline the incarcerated state of the photograph's subject, emphasizing indirectly the pathos of the animal's situation and state of mind.

Are viewers simply anthropomorphizing the animal and sentimentalizing its condition? Is there any validity to this reaction? Contemporary neuroscientists would say: 'yes'! When humans look into each other's eyes a degree of inter-subjective transfer occurs as a result of the discharging of mirror neurons as part of the brain's mirror neuron system. A similar process operates in the relations between humans and various mammals, for example, dogs, for the same reason. When visual cues activate mirror neurons, the result is what has been described as 'a shared manifold of intersubjectivity' that is in turn responsible for what we call empathy. Further,

scientists have demonstrated that mirror neurons are activated even by the idea of a particular action, whether in words or through an image; this phenomenon helps to explain why the empathetic reaction elicited by images is also induced by stories, perhaps with a difference in degree. Similarly, the nature of a reader's or viewer's reaction will be influenced to varying degrees by their environmental and cultural circumstances. (See Alistair Fox for a discussion of the implication of these findings for our understanding of literature and the arts.) Arguably, the power of the viewer's emotional response (activated by mirror neuron reactions) to 'enclosure XVIII' precedes and overrides any concerns about the 'reliability' of the image, explaining its popularity.

Strangely enough, Spiers' image of the soulful baboon behind glass is not presented as anomalous or worthy of any specific attention. It is hidden in a line up of three black and white images in which the 'gaze' of the other two animals is obscured. In the case of the photograph of a second baboon, 'enclosure XII', which is set off alone on the back wall, the eyes of the animal are actually closed. The import of print 'enclosure XVIII' is concealed in the sense that its difference may not be initially recognized by the viewer – though, strikingly, many are drawn to that particular image, as mentioned above, without being able to articulate what distinguished this image.

Two further photographs stand out from the rest because they are in color. Both reiterate quite obviously the theme of photography as unreliable. In the first, 'to never find a day', a streak across the photograph's surface raises questions about the

extension and numbers of layers of glass that separate the viewer from the scene observed – a snake hidden in a bowl of water inside a glass tank, discerned by the viewer only as a consequence of careful observation.

The second photograph, 'before there was hope', does not include any obvious animals. It offers instead an exterior scene (a full shot) that includes, occupying a little more than one half of the frame, a photograph within a photograph in the form of a damaged canvas backdrop of a verdant scene. The frame of the collapsing photograph within the photograph is again divided by a road that recedes away from the viewer in forced one-point perspective. This disintegrating canvas hangs alongside a scruffy set of dried-up bushes, which occupy the left side of the frame located within the 'real' space of the photograph, that is to say the one occupied by the photographer.

This doubling up asks the viewer to ponder the nature of the image and the space(s) that it reproduces. The lack of depth of focus raised the question, for example, of the location of the scene. Is it a scene in nature or one created on a stage for the purpose of the photograph? The double image (now a familiar trope, the legacy of postmodernism) foregrounds the issues of photographic images as a play of surfaces, the impact of which depends on an eternal game of '*trompe-l'oeil*', in which a viewer is tricked into 'seeing' three-dimensional space within a flat plane.

Notwithstanding its resounding conclusion, the inclusion of 'enclosure XVII,' means that the exhibition taken as a whole has an ironic twist. It constitutes a metaphorical example of the 'biter

bit' – in which the artist seeks to underline a particular perspective, only to come out on the other side of the debate – in favor of a certain kind of humanism, now extended to other mammals – quite the opposite of what the majority of the images included, five out of six, propose. The title 'Before There Was Hope' has a desperate ring in the context of the exhibition – neither witty nor cynical. It seems to comment definitively on 'enclosure XVIII' as being 'without hope'; the use of the word 'hope', however, mitigates that absolute harshness of the animals' fate, of our inability to 'know'. Perhaps we must recognize the possibility of inter-subjectivity, our capacity to know another animal, be it human or otherwise, 'before there can be hope'.

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## **Appendix: Justin Spiers – Biographical Overview**

New Zealand photographer Justin Spiers has a long-standing interest in documenting and exploring the relations between humans and their environment, especially, but not exclusively, with regards to the animals that share their planet. He is perhaps best known for 'Pet Photo Booth', initiated in 2005 with Yvonne Doherty while he was Director of the Perth Centre for Photography, a position he held from 2004-2007. He has continued to pursue this project in Australia and New Zealand, most recently, during his tenure as Caselberg Trust Creative Connections resident in 2018. During this residency, he produced portraits of Otago Peninsula residents and their pets using the 'Pet Photo Booth' format.

Works from the 'Pet Photo Booth' project have been widely exhibited, including at the National Portrait Gallery (Canberra, Australia) in 2009, the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art and the Australian Centre for Photography in 2012, as well as at the Pah Homestead in Auckland, which houses the James Wallace Art Trust's collection of New Zealand art, in 2019. Spiers describes the photographs as reproducing 'the little intimacies' that arise between animal and owner. 'It's not until you look back later on and see how affectionate or strange the way they hold their animal [is],' he explains. For visual culture scholar Jonathan Marshall, 'Pet Photo Booth' testifies to the ways 'that true animality has disappeared from Western culture, its putatively authentic wildness

replaced by an increasingly mediated, commodified or imagined projection of our selves or desires’.

‘The Sides of My Intent’, at the *a gallery*, Dunedin, in 2012, takes up another theme that characterises Spiers’s oeuvre, presenting a collection of photographs, ‘the subject matter’ of which is: ‘animals in captivity and...the space between the viewer and the viewed’, according to Franky Strachan writing for the *Otago Daily Times* in 2012. Similarly, *Zoo Series* exhibited as part of *Hijacked III* (Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2012), ‘uses the camera’s gaze to highlight the physical barriers that enclose zoo animals while exposing them to scrutiny...our view...obscured by the sweaty blur of condensation on protective glass’, as described by art writer Thea Constantino in *DAILEYSERVING* (14 March 2012). In the artist’s words as quoted by *timemachine*, in its *Domesticated Issue*: ‘This mediating layer, which is meant to be clear and not seen, becomes a kind of third space, full of illusory reflections and a patina of scratches and marks.’

‘Meat Fence,’ another project that resulted in a 2014 exhibition at the Perth Centre for Photography with Jonathan Marshall, serves to – in Spiers’ words in *The Perth Voice Interactive* (21 February 2014) – ‘prompt people to reflect on attitudes towards animals...often taken for granted’. ‘Meat Fence’ documents ‘a fence hung with more than 100 pignskins of varying ages on Middlemarch-Macraes Road’. One inhabitant of the region recalls, talking to the *Otago Daily Times* (6 September 2016), ‘going past this when I was 4-5 years old on our way home to Middlemarch. Me and my older sister called it the pig fence’. From the perspective of reviewer Alicia



Prevera in *The Perth Voice Interactive*, 'Meat Fence'...'challenges the mainstream utilitarian approach to farming, hunting and killing animals by showing a literal close-up of its brutality and devastating environmental impact'. Jonathan Marshall, Spiers' collaborator on 'Meat Fence', explains in a 2017 article:

Throughout the series, our aim was to link the pigs with the landscape, with which they merge, to bring into view the violence of our relationship with landscapes and animals throughout human history and into the present.

Justin Spiers' current projects continue this exploration of the connections between humans and animals, their representations and their implications, in particular within the context of the contemporary photographic apparatus.

RDS Gallery, Dunedin

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