Changing culture through photography

Drawing on their international reputation in photography, the university’s researchers have changed the way images can be used to help us engage with our history and identity. From playing a key role in reconciling divided communities to creating the way public projects such as the Millennium Dome are recorded and displayed, these innovative practices have demonstrated the cultural impact the medium can have.

Professor Mark Power, a member of the prestigious, international Magnum group, said: “For me, photography has real legitimacy as a medium of critical artistic significance within the wider cultural economy and public sphere.” His projects, in which large-format camera work produces astonishing effects of light and line, have given a new interpretative context to a number of popular national icons and local people, including the BBC’s Shipping Forecast, the varied people within his Black Country Stories, and the documentation of construction projects such as the Millennium Dome and the Airbus A380, the largest plane ever built.

Emma Chetcuti, the Director of Multistory, has stated: “Mark’s work has made an impact, in particular, on the local people who took part in the project and who came to see the work at The New Art Gallery Walsall, with the work affording them the opportunity to imagine themselves and where they came from differently.”

Through such projects, photography at the University of Brighton captures the changing nature, regeneration and transformation of places, playing a part in the making of history and heritage, while developing the way art is used to understand public memory. Drawing together historical and practice-based approaches, Dr Louise Purbrick works with photographer and university colleague Xavier Ribas on the AHRC-funded Traces of Nitrate project, which visualises the land, cityscapes and material histories of nitrate mining in Britain and Chile, exploring the legacies of British colonial intervention, and how material culture holds the past in the present.

The project has produced an exhibition in collaboration with international partners and a prestigious international contemporary art venue, the MACBA-Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona. The exhibition will tour to another two major venues in the UK and Spain.

Fellow photographer Julia Winckler, oscillating deliberately between photographic and archival research, has developed photography as a medium through which collective memories can be reconstructed and given a renewed cultural presence. Her research communicates the capacity of photography to unearth both personal and cultural memories and to support processes of remembrance. Winckler’s ‘Traces’ exhibition at the Austrian Cultural Forum brought important responses from the Association of Jewish Refugees, acknowledging that her work made “the private public, the individual universal, transforming the most humble photographs into images so utterly powerful.”

The exhibition also led to her appearance on ‘Akun Espiritu: Holocaust’, which offered insights into how creative photographic practices can help overcome the trauma of disappearance associated with the Holocaust. The engagement of the public with photography of this kind was described in a review: “Robert Lowell said, ‘A poem is an event … not the record of an event’. This show is an event because it enables the viewer to re-realis loss and discovery, absence and presence” (Clare Best, The London Magazine, May 2012).

The reputation developed by its major practitioners and theorists allows the university to play a key role in the engagement of audiences with photography. Forming and supporting exhibitions and publications, including the Brighton Photo Biennial, the university has encouraged and contributed to critical debate around the changing uses and increasing cultural prominence of the medium, whether this is in the methods of visual storytelling that develop identity, or in the cultural position of photography in the public sense of heritage.

“Our research has helped to enrich the public imagination with the recognition of photography as new cultural capital,” said Professor Power. “We’ve succeeded in deepening cultural experiences and insights for audiences, and we’ve strengthened the place of photography within the creative economy, helping to build and sustain audiences.”

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