



Allan deSouza: The Lost Pictures

Talwar Gallery

21 MAY - 15 JULY

Allan deSouza's poignant exhibition explores the failings of both memory and photography as means of recording and preserving the past from aging, loss, displacement and historical change. Based on prints of slides his father took in Kenya in 1962-3 when deSouza and his siblings were children, and which the artist left about his house to accumulate dirt and grime, the works depict snippets of typical childhood photos obscured by whirls of body hair, stains, water spots and waxy patches which resemble congealed fat or scarred skin.

In *Arbor* (all works 2004), the artist and his brother, in white shirts, and his two sisters, in orange dresses which match the flowers behind them, smile broadly, their images hazy through a network of stains which flattens perspective and dulls detail. In *Tomorrow*, deSouza and his brother stand before a billboard of a locomotive captioned 'For To-morrow', an expression of the confidence the 60s placed in progress and here a metaphor for the promise of youth that snapshots are supposed to record and to preserve. In *Harambee* - a word used as a Kenyan independence slogan meaning 'Let's all pull together' - a group of children appears as soapy shadows suggesting both that personal history often plays out against significant political or sociological events and that the freshness of youth and the optimism of Kenyan nationhood have spoiled.

DeSouza began this series in 2003 shortly after his mother died and shortly after a brief visit to Kenya, which the family had left in 1965 for the UK where he spent the rest of his youth. In Nairobi he found his recollections of his childhood alien to the contemporary city. When he later described his visit to his mother, and as they reminisced, she would cut him off abruptly, saying that 'the fog was coming in', as if the process of recalling her past were overwhelming her memory. Much of what she told him about her past, proved, he learned later, to be fictitious. Immigration, illness, time and experience had compromised and constructed her recollections as much as they had distanced the artist from his familiarity with the Nairobi of his past.

In deSouza's work, hair and dirt become metaphors for these things, collapsing the distance between the time in which the original slides were taken and in which deSouza used them, suggesting that history and memory are merely detritus of life, mediated by experience and loss. But there is also nostalgia here: by updating the photos, deSouza attempts to merge his past and present, inscribing himself in the images by means of the slough of his daily life. By doing so, he subverts the attempt most of us make to preserve the past, and ultimately ourselves, against time and aging, insisting that life, and hence what we freeze in photographs, is physical. JM

Left
Allan deSouza
Harambee, 2004, digital
C-print, 102 x 152 cm
COURTESY TALWAR GALLERY,
NEW YORK

Below
Joan Mitchell *Untitled*,
c.1960, oil on canvas,
129 x 202 cm
COURTESY CHEIM & READ,
NEW YORK

Joan Mitchell: Fremicourt Paintings 1960-62

Cheim & Read

10 MAY - 25 JUNE

It was to a studio on the rue Fremicourt that Joan Mitchell moved in 1959, roughly four years after she first decided that France would hold her artistic future, and it was in that studio that she made what she would come to call 'very violent and angry paintings', a selection of which are on display here. As we know, such rhetoric was common to the milieu of Abstract Expressionism, with its promotion of the artist as a sinkhole of existential angst who defended his (always 'his') aesthetic worldview as much with whisky and fists as with painting. Perhaps it was common for Mitchell too, given the stories of her sharp intellect, short fuse and foul mouth. When looking at this cross-section of Mitchell's paintings from the first few years of the 1960s, however, whatever anger fuelled what Linda Nochlin named Mitchell's 'rage to paint', whatever violence, real or

imagined, the artist exacted up these canvases, one is struck how such rhetoric seems to falter of its mark.

Mitchell's marks, of course remain as expressionist. But one gets the sense here that they are beginning to depart, as Mitchell geographically, from the New School. Paint has been laid down heavily but then scraped and rubbed. Any excess in the third dimension has been traded for urgency in the second. And it is difficult not to see how Mitchell's brushwork is broken by certain datums that organize surfaces, a retreat from the all-over idiom that had minted so much lyrical wallpaper back in the States.

Take one of the larger, horizontally oriented canvases, *Untitled* (c.1960), noticeable for its bright oranges and greens. It is organized along an internal horizontal section which bisects the canvas, dividing top from bottom and giving appearance of a surface folded upon itself. Or take another, *L* (1961), this one barely rectangular, showing lavender strokes demarcate opposing quadrants. The work's subtle cruciform division. Or, finally, consider the well-known *La Chatiere* (1960) arrangement of hasty reds arranged around a black and absent centre.

What are these works if not returns to the traditional pictorial genres of Landscape, Still Life, Portrait? The horizon line, crooked circle provide a conventional one which a previous generation of painters had demolished, but to which Mitchell returns, it is not to revive but to seek out ruptures. Thus Mitchell's was much a retreat from those earlier achievements as much as a demonstration of her unwillingness to entertain the thought, as much as the US in the early 60s, that she had just about run its course.

