

ANDREAS GURSKY

Tate Gallery, Liverpool, 1995



Lots of people still, I think, regard a photograph as just a photograph. Be it on a billboard, a gallery wall or a magazine page, it makes no difference - they mentally go through the frame and into the scene that is represented. But those who saw Andreas Gursky's show in Liverpool will know the difference between the large pictures in the gallery and the little image reproduced with this review, which can only operate as a token, a dim reminder of what one saw there.

Size is of course the most obvious aspect of Gursky's pictures. Though they are not in fact as big as Jeff Wall's or Hannah Collins' images - and nowhere near the size of the average billboard -, his prints are big for photographs, nearer the size of most paintings. One would guess that's a parallel that Gursky intends. The scale of the images gives the spectator a greater range of experiences than one usually finds with photographs, as you move not only your eye but your body to look at them. One moves from an overall sweep of the image to a minute inspection of its details, which are often of such an intensity that they cannot be encompassed, but only felt.

There's a danger that Gursky's pictures are simplistically categorized as part of a contemporary trend for 'big photographs'; likewise, there has been up to now a rather reductive understanding of his subject matter. On one end of his range would be sited his factory pictures, obsessively detailed records

of industrial environments, which of all his work owes most to his training with Bernd Becher. At the other extreme are those images of an overwhelming natural sublimity (such as the Aletschgletscher) which sit within the German Romantic tradition of Caspar David Friedrich. The two sorts of subject matter seem quite opposed, sharing only that sense of accumulation, indeed excess.



The great value of the Liverpool show was that it allowed one to trace the relation between those two apparently opposed subjects. Indeed, some of Gursky's most potent images bring those elements together in a complex layering of the cultural and the natural, the contemporary and the historical. The pseudo-traditional Grand Hyatt Park sits next to the Hong Kong harbour where a dredger is disgorging its mud; on the quay at Salerno, a sea of Fiat Unos are spread out in front of the medieval hilltop citadel beyond. This kind of juxtaposition is reminiscent of the contemporary post-modern' landscape work made elsewhere - by Len Jenschel or Joel Sternfeld in the American West or, in Britain, by John Kippin.

But where those photographers use colour that is rich and local, Gursky's is often pale and off-key. And where their use of irony is overt, he remains detached and distanced. It's harder to know what his position is. Is it the "view from afar" which Levi-Strauss recommended as the ideal anthropological placement, or is he more like Harry Lime, seeing his fellow citizens as so many ants scurrying around down below?

The show also revealed some other intriguing aspects to Gursky's work. Several images at first suggest an affinity with forms of abstract minimalism but then turn out to be altogether 'documentary' - stripes à la Daniel Buren are in fact on a motorway barrier (through which one sees a fragmented flattened field of cows), while a sea of Rymanesque grey/ off-white texture is in fact a synthetic carpet on a gallery floor. In the context of Gursky's other work, it becomes another image of flickering infinity: to see the world in a tuft of carpet? Maybe, in that respect, it is not peripheral to his work at all, but actually embodies a central concern - the dislocation of the Romantic in an industrialized culture.

There is also the question of Gursky's use of digitalization, one of the surprises of the exhibition. There were - I think - three images where he exploited computer technology. In the first, the image of an apartment block in Montparnasse, it is largely a technical device to capture the extraordinary horizontal spread of the building. The second, in the PTT building in Rotterdam, is similarly horizontal, except that the ceiling now has two vanishing points, a disorientating effect reminiscent of some of the early Renaissance experiments with perspective.



It is, however, the third case that is most provocative, where, to intensify the sense of a teeming mass of people at a car show in Paris, Gursky has dropped in a few figures to 'fill in' the space at the front. It is impossible to imagine the Bechers, or even Hofer or Struth doing that; it would

go against the very ethic of their work. It suggests that Gursky is moving away from that ethic, to think of his images as pictures rather than as records. Yet his photographs, gloriously pictorial as they are, do also operate as cultural critiques and it is important that all those cars at Salerno, all those traders in the Tokyo stock market, all those machines at Siemens or Grundig, are actually there.

It is easy to make too much of that one case (though the point is one can't be sure if there is just one case). To end with a curious parallel: Gilbert Adair, writing about Clint Eastwood's Westerns, which until recently had been heavily influenced by the parodic irony of Sergio Leone, has suggested that *Unforgiven* is what the American cinema might look like when it "re-emerged on the other side of post-modernism": the film, he suggests, is the first "post-post-modern Western".

Perhaps Gursky's work is what photography looks like as it comes out of its own self-conscious, self-questioning mode. He wanders a planet where computer technologies, the supposed "global village", the disorientation of postmodern society is no longer news. As he travels, he remains detached from whatever culture he's visiting, gazing down from his hotel window with the contemporary ethnographer's awareness that he can observe but he cannot participate. At 'home' in Europe, he is equally detached, for our supposedly 'post-industrial' culture still looks remarkably industrial, remarkably alienating. But he is occasionally able to escape it all, and finally without irony find that "in the mountains - there you feel free". (If not for long, before a row of cross-country skiers trundle across the scene.)

Complex questions about the role of the individual in this contemporary culture may be raised by Gursky's work, but they are embedded in pictures that, ultimately, most mysteriously, just are. Or rather seem to be so, for of course these images are made by Gursky and not merely taken. But, as Adair comments of Eastwood that he never once winks at the audience to say "Hell, it's only a movie", so Gursky does not need to tell us that these are 'only' photographs. Rather it seems as if banal actuality has been effortlessly transformed into these extraordinary pictures. But if Gursky himself emphasises his own role in the making of his images, they would nevertheless not be what they are if that actuality wasn't there in the first place.

Meanwhile, the Mersey flows by outside, muddy and mythic, and on the way home, through Warrington and Runcorn, we keep seeing Gurskys framed in the train window.