



# MIRIAM STANNAGE: SURVEY 2006 - 2016

LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY

30 JULY - 24 SEPTEMBER 2016

Large  
Print

## THAT WHICH IS HIDDEN

Miriam Stannage's art is defined by her ability to chronicle the awkward, the beautiful and the strange. This exhibition of Stannage's recent work testifies to the conceptual rigour that has characterised her entire practice, and to her ongoing engagement with symbolism relating to the eye, vision and blindness.

In Creative photography (Kodak Encyclopaedia), 2014, Stannage has playfully disrupted the smooth and authoritative narrative of the Kodak encyclopaedia's by placing selected objects and images within the confines of the picture frame. The work results from an accumulation of dissonant elements, as each book cover is enhanced by the inclusion of a layer of the artist's own vision over accepted photographic and cinematic conventions.

Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.

This quote by René Magritte is printed beneath a reproduction of his 1964 self-portrait on display in the exhibition. The quote continues:

There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us.<sup>1</sup>



Rene Magritte

"Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see."  
-René Magritte

The Son of Man

Security on The Son of Man (after Magritte), 2014, from Security series, found poster with security camera, 91.5 x 61 cm  
© Miriam Stannage

In Security on The Son of Man (after Magritte), 2014, Stannage has added a domed security camera over Magritte's apple to create a double occlusion of the face. Both Magritte and Stannage are intrigued by how we can be deceived by what we see. What is common to both the Magritte work and Stannage's Security Notice series is the sense that identity is never fully recoverable. Even if the faces were revealed, some crucial aspects of each individual would remain concealed.

When we approach Security on The Son of Man (after Magritte) the viewer's own image is reflected upon the surface of the camera dome. Stannage's use of this device is a reference to the convex mirror in Jan van Eyck's remarkable The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434, and it operates to shift the audience's role from being merely spectators to performers. We look at the work and the work observes us back. In doing so, Stannage reveals the limits and fallibility of each gaze in turn; human perception confronted by the unblinking mechanical eyes of closed-circuit television cameras. For many of us, being observed by CCTV cameras feels intrusive, yet Stannage has seamlessly aligned camera surveillance with the benevolent, omniscient eye of her God. The camera has become the symbolic eye of a God who sees all and knows all.

Stannage uses objects to trace trajectories of the intangible. The security camera is a symptom of an excessive commitment to the visual that equates seeing with control. Yet much remains furtive and able to slip beyond the gaze of the camera. In her photographic series On this site, 2009, and Library, 2010, the ephemeral, dynamic qualities of spoken language are reduced to words spelt using colourful, plastic letters. The artist uses language as object and, as in the case of Missing female, 2009, as representation of items of clothing strewn across the landscape. These words become evidence - traces of people in the absence of a physical body - and an extrapolation of the Christian notion of the 'word made flesh'.

Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley exist as modern icons who leave spectral traces within the collective memory. In Marilyn and Elvis (Spirit Photographs) series, 2009 - 2010, Stannage has inserted plasticised versions of these famous figures at various sites in the Western Australian landscape. While some are playful and exuberant, the violence inflicted upon Marilyn in Leda and the Swan has more in common with the scenes of devastation from Paradise Lost, 2008. The creation of this series of photographs saw Stannage roaming suburban streets during 'verge collection' to insert mannequins into piles of rubbish. By documenting the male and female mannequins amongst domestic refuse she has included

them in a commentary on cycles of life, of both people and objects, and the inevitability of physical death. And just as mannequins exist as life-like human substitutes, visual art can only function removed from a lived reality.

The visible is a beguiling, yet flawed, means of communication. There are limits to what we can see, and limits to what we can know. In the gaps, mystery remains.

Lee Kinsella

Curator, Miriam Stannage: Survey 2006-2016



The observer observed, 2015, from Security series,  
objects on canvas, 153 x 102 cm  
Photo: Lyle Branson. © Miriam Stannage

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1. Magritte quoted from a radio interview with Jean Neyens (1965), cited in Harry Torczyner, Magritte: Ideas and Images, trans. Richard Millen, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1979, p. 172.

## SECURITY NOTICES

The fourth 'lesson' in Hito Steyerl's 2013 video work, How not to be seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File, lists ways of 'becoming invisible by disappearing':

"living in a gated community; living in a military zone; being in an airport, factory or museum; being a superhero; being female and over 50... being a wifi signal moving between human bodies."<sup>1</sup>

The 16 minute film, part instructional video and part absurdist political treatise, examines visibility and its opposites in a world in which both governments and corporate bodies capture, store and circulate images of large portions of the physical world. At its centre is a concrete 'resolution target' set into the Californian desert in the 1950s by the US Military, used to calibrate aerial photography, or in Steyerl's words "to measure the resolution of the world as a picture". Its cracked and warping surface and a droll, disembodied electronic narration signal its redundancy in favor of digital, pixel-based photography:

"In 1996 resolution in the area is about 12m per pixel. Today it is one foot. To become invisible one has to become smaller or equal to one pixel."

Steyerl's How Not to be Seen premiered the same year that Edward Snowden revealed the extent of governmental surveillance online, but even without state intervention our data is harvested. Google, Facebook and other companies trade it for targeted advertising revenue; studies suggest that Facebook can, based on user behaviour, predict when users will experience 'life events' like divorces and pregnancies.<sup>2</sup> Beyond our physical visibility in images, the data that we shed daily like skin offers different ways to be traced, to be legible if not explicitly seen. To live now is therefore to assume surveillance as a given at all times, without access to an easy aesthetic vocabulary for its apparatus. It is to actively perform one's life as for an audience – for audiences, plural.

Visibility and surveillance are prominent themes in a number of Miriam Stannage's works, which often toy with the simultaneous sense of safety and control implied by the word security. However, against this wider context, the motif of the CCTV camera connects beyond the contemporary, to a historical moment. In contrast to more invisible, integrated and high-tech methods of modern surveillance, these tangible objects clearly signal their operation and intent. Their honesty feels old-world, nostalgic. Stannage's connection of the security camera with iconography from mid-20th century icons of modernist painting - and with infamous artefacts from

the artist's own past bodies of work, like clay targets and plastic letters - amplifies this sense of reflection. A recent series of large, collaged canvases arrange a repeating interplay of these elements, as though seeking to create a concise visual dictionary of four decades of Stannage's practice. The watchful eyes suggested by these cameras might not be those of a state, a corporation or even of a paternalistic art history, but those of the artist herself, taking stock of her sustained investigation into the image and its objects. The presence of a single, white crucifix alludes to a greater omnipotence, one that would make human efforts to know and see all seem absurd, or redundant.

Stubbornly sculptural, these canvases are also a reminder of the physicality of the 'picture plane', of the unbreakable connection between the 'image' and its carrier, whether it be paper, canvas, celluloid or liquid crystal. 'The image' suggests a seductive non-reality, something dematerialised and moving freely, but Stannage is insistent we remember that our world is made by things bumping up against each other.

The security camera is useless without the body. Throughout the exhibition objects inhabit, undermine or underwrite images. These objects carry time with them, recorded in dog-ears and fading, in planned and unplanned obsolescence, or in their passage between one photograph and the next. The insistent physicality of

objects is what offers Stannage an analogue loophole out of surveillance paranoia and into a space where privacy and visibility become a productive game. In the Security Notice series, individual identities of a number of subjects are concealed using a simple, ironic device: their faces are hidden behind a sign reading 'Security Notice: Surveillance Cameras in Use'. But, partial privacy results in other kinds of revelations: given notice, the subjects are able to hide in plain sight.

Gemma Weston

Curator, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, UWA

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1. Hito Steyerl, How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File, 2013, 15:52, can be viewed online at Artforum.com: [https://artforum.com/video/id=51651&mode=large&page\\_id=2](https://artforum.com/video/id=51651&mode=large&page_id=2)
  2. Cornell University researcher Jon Kleinberg and Facebook senior engineer Lars Backstrom's co-written research paper "Romantic Partnerships and the Dispersion of Social Ties: A Network Analysis of Relationship Status on Facebook" was summarised and widely circulated among news outlets in 2013. Google's very thorough analytics - and violations of privacy - are also well documented. In 2014 US Supreme Court rejected Google's bid to dismiss a lawsuit pertaining to alleged unlawful gathering of email addresses and passwords during the location verification of Google Street View cars.

## LIST OF WORKS

All works are by Miriam Stannage and from her collection, unless noted otherwise.

Works by Miriam Stannage are copyright and reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Creative photography (Kodak Encyclopaedia), 2014

found books and mixed media collage: 15 parts  
28 x 22 cm each

History of photography, 1974, from Kodak Slide series

acrylic and fibre-tipped pen on canvas  
147.5 x 147.5 cm

Security on the Son of Man (after Magritte), 2014, from Security series

found poster with security camera  
image size 81.5 x 56 cm;  
sheet size 91.5 x 61 cm

Identity unknown (from CCTV), 2014  
40 digital images

Library, 2010, from Site series

lightjet photographs: 20 parts  
40 x 50 cm each  
The University of Western Australia Art Collection,  
University Senate Grant,  
2014

On this site, 2009  
lightjet photographs: 18 parts  
40 x 50 cm each

Missing female, 2009  
lightjet photographs: 8 parts  
40 x 50 cm each

Security for Mondrian, 2015, from Security series  
acrylic and object on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

You Are Here, 2015, from Security series  
felt-tipped pen and ink on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

Security camera on shooting range, 2015-16, from Security series  
acrylic and objects on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

Crimes and suspects, 2015, from Security series  
felt-tipped pen and ink on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

Security notice in summer landscape, 2015, from Security series  
acrylic and object on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

Lost in bushfire, 2015-6, from Security series  
Liquitex [adhesive] spray and objects on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

The observer observed, 2015, from Security series  
objects on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

Looking out for Australia (braille version), 2016, from Security series  
Liquitex [adhesive] spray, pages of braille, dome security camera on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

Library fire, 2016, from Security series  
Liquitex [adhesive] spray, alphabet letters and security camera on canvas  
153 x 102 cm

For the known and unknown, 2016, from Security series  
object on canvas  
153 x 91 cm

Security Notice series, 2015  
lightjet photographs  
100 x 70 cm each  
Heirisson Island camper  
Karrakatta Cemetery  
Equestrian  
Museum of Natural History  
Wall mural  
Model aeroplane  
Night swimmer  
Surfboard rider  
Night cleaner, Rottneest  
Shooter  
Lacrosse player  
Brickie

[4 untitled works], 2008,  
from Paradise Lost series  
lightjet photographs  
70 x 100 cm each  
The University of Western  
Australia Art Collection,  
University Senate Grant,  
2014

Marilyn and Elvis (Spirit  
Photographs) series, 2009–  
2010

lightjet photographs  
70 x 100 cm each

Everlastings

Ophelia (after Millais)

Rock and roll

Salvage yard office

Salvage yard

The entertainers

The University of Western  
Australia Art Collection,  
University Senate Grant,  
2014

Leda and the swan

Brickworks

Collection of the artist

Books from Security Signs  
series, 2014

Holy Bible

Crimes of passion

The blind assassin

Let's look out for Australia

(braille version)

Preparing for the  
unexpected (braille version)

Wedding folio

Visual arts diary

100 Popular Pictures:

Facsimile Reproductions in

Colour of Popular Pictures

Selected from the World's

Great Galleries with an

introduction by M.H.

Spielmann and notes by

Arthur Fish (2 volumes),  
Cassel and Company

Limited, London, 1911.



Museum of Natural History, 2015, from Security Notice series,  
lightjet photograph, 100 x 70 cm  
© Miriam Stannage



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Gemma Weston for her valuable contribution to this catalogue. Special thanks also to my colleagues at UWAP and Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery for their ongoing support, and Professors Ted Snell and Helen Ennis for their contribution to the monograph Miriam Stannage: Time Framed.

Finally, I am indebted to Miriam Stannage - a remarkable artist who so generously gave of her time for the realisation of this exhibition and publication.

Lee Kinsella

Curator of Miriam Stannage: Survey 2006 - 2016

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ISBN 978 1 876793 77 7

Cover image: Library (detail), 2010, from Site series, lightjet photographs: 20 parts, 40 x 50 cm each

The University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 2014. Photo: Acorn Photography. © Miriam Stannage



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