



This is number 25 in an ongoing series of small publications profiling new work exhibited at Street Level Photoworks.

**Marjolaine Ryley** is an artist who has exhibited her work both nationally and internationally including Solo exhibitions at Harbourfront Arts Centre, Toronto and Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland. This minigraph was produced to coincide with *Résidence Astral* a major solo exhibition of her work at Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow.

From 2005-2007 Ryley undertook a visiting research fellowship at the Photography and the Archive Research Centre at London College of Communication. This fellowship resulted in the publication *Field Study 7 - Résidence Astral* published by PARC. Ryley also developed a research website [www.thelastpictureshow.org](http://www.thelastpictureshow.org) which looks at the effects of digital technologies on family photography and the shifting nature of these archives in the digital age. The site brings together photographic archival collections, writings and artists projects, acting as a link between analogue and digital uses of family photography.

Ryley is currently a Senior Lecturer in Photography and Video Art at the University of Sunderland. Her first artists' monograph *Villa Mona A Proper Kind of House* is available from Trace Editions and Cornerhouse Books.

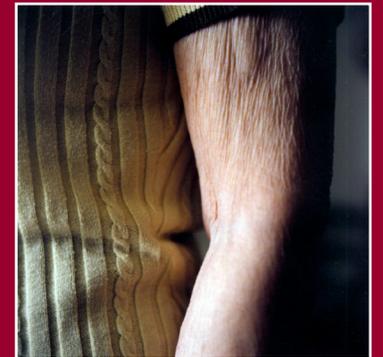
**Val Williams** Val Williams is a curator and writer and Professor of the History and Culture of Photography, University of the Arts London. She is Director of the Photography and the Archive Research Centre at the London College of Communication and an editor of the Journal of Photography and Culture.

Recent projects include the curation of Martin Parr's retrospective at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, and she is author of *Martin Parr: Photographs*. She edited the Photoworks book *When We Were Young: Club and Street portraits* by Derek Ridgers and is co-author of *Magnum Ireland*.

In 2007, she co-curated the exhibition *How We Are: Photographing Britain* for Tate Britain.



## Marjolaine Ryley



## The Last Picture Show: Marjolaine Ryley

Marjolaine Ryley uses photography to explore a past, which defines the present. Through her photographic practice, she has constructed a family archive which is reflective and complex. Interrogating the status and presence of the family album, she has both supported and subverted its methodology, departing from the haphazard, the unschematic and developing a highly sophisticated viewing of the vernacular.

Ryley's work is informed by memories, of family and of localities. She uses a close and intense photographic vision and written texts to produce densely structured portraits of locales infused with recollection, reminiscence and testimony. In *Résidence Astral*, a study of her grandmother's apartment in Belgium, she uses her own and her mother's testimony to transform this unremarkable dwelling into an allegory of growing up, combining love with fear to a remarkable degree.

Like many others who have explored their families through photography, Ryley has found this a complex and sometimes troubling task. What we feel about our closest relations cannot always be expressed through photography, but we look to the medium to expose the cracks which lie between, the dissonance, which lies behind most domestic gatherings. Tellingly, she has cited the Dogma film *Festen* as one of her primary references. This terrible tale of festivity gone wrong is a saga of misdirected looks, awkward body language and dark whispers, and though *Résidence Astral* is more concerned with the unreliability of memory than with this tragic sense of loss, ghosts nevertheless linger.

That Marjolaine Ryley has titled her research project *The Last Picture Show* is telling; it is as if she perceives photography as a tangible, material presence slipping away into a digital reality- the shoe box becomes the screen and the databank- less likely to be slipped between the generations, its secrets no longer so well hidden, its mysteries disengaged.

When Marjolaine and her mother Brigitte (who has contributed writings to this project) remember the *Résidence Astral*, they see it through the prism of contemporary experience, against the backdrop of collected possessions, personal archives, memories of the past and conflicted feelings. In an essay written from notes made while travelling back to Britain from Belgium she remembered that:

*Being in the apartment is like being saved. You leave the real world behind and step into a landscape in miniature. Within this embrace you receive nourishment, through warmth and food you shrink in size and become small again. As the hours and days drift by you begin to feel nauseous, you develop aches and pains of the body and soul. You begin to suffocate, to long for fresh air and real life. Longing to be somewhere else, anywhere else overcomes you. Slowly, as the grip tightens, you must bid for escape, run for your life. Once ejected from the killer apartment and all its comforts and promises you feel a surge of panic. The harsh light of responsibility shines on you again. The pain and misunderstanding return afresh. You experience elation briefly as you exhume your feelings, but the exhaustion returns. Your life is now your own*



*again, and as the train leaves carrying with it the lingering scents of Brussels, once again life is full of possibilities. Yet how quickly you begin to miss and long for the apartment and all its comforts.*

The challenge for the photographer was to capture these colliding extremes of anxiety and euphoria, the urge to escape the past contradicting the urge to remain a part of it.

Marjolaine has been photographing her grandmother's apartment since 1993. Early work suggests a leaning towards the family snapshot, as she re-creates the family group, eating dinner, sitting on the sofa. Yet even in this work, there is pain mixed with pleasure, family members do not touch, seem isolated from each other in this intimate familial space. Evidence of domestic work is abundant- a bundle of supermarket till receipts carefully pinned to the wall beside an apron, a pair of rubber gloves hanging like pale disembodied hands above a tea towel and a set of oven gloves. A woman works alone in the small kitchen, her back to a large window beyond which is the hazy outline of the outside world. A television plays to a silent and empty room and small groups of photographs and memorabilia cluster on shelves, echoes of the lost and the gone. Painted reproductions of gardens and trees are as if marooned in an alien and inorganic universe, a potted plant lurks in the gloom, fruit in a bowl is blemished, light carefully excluded by dense flowered curtaining. But among this stiff serenity are moments of disarray- a woman rolls on a bed her clothes scattered around her, the sun creeps in beneath a curtain, objects jostle for position.

Many of the early photographs are blurred, this dysfunction emphasises references to the family snapshot- these are the photographs which would more usually have been thrown away, a hazy couple behind the Christmas table, a collection of toiletries on a bathroom shelf, a figure glimpsed along a corridor, a jumbled bedroom. Marjolaine

Ryley arranges these square, blurred photographs in a grid, against referencing art practice and the critical theory, which accompanies it. She quotes from David Company writing on the grid in his book, *Art and Photography* (Phaidon Press 2003): *'It is also an anti-hierarchical form that flattens time and de-narratives images. Rather than offering anything concrete, the grid of photographs offers raw material to the viewer as potential meaning, in a manner akin to the archive itself.'*

In making these consciously blurred photographs, and imposing on them the severe symmetry of the grid, Marjolaine Ryley is exploring the status of contemporary photographic practice. By seeming to abandon high production values, yet at the same time using precise technical knowledge to achieve the effect of a snapshot, she acknowledges the dualities and freedoms of contemporary photography, to traverse the chasms between the personal and the public. Writing in a preparatory text for *The Last Picture Show* website, she remarks:

*'Art photography has developed and the personal subject of family has been increasingly validated, 'vernacular' photography has also been recognized as making important and interesting conclusions. Vernacular collections have made their way into galleries and the web has provided a space for amateurs and professionals alike to share their photographs. ... The private album has now gone public and as weblogs now offer us the perfect opportunity for us to reveal our kith and kin 'warts and all' and as reality television make celebrities of normal people, it seems everyone (and their families) can now star in their own lives'.*

In the *Résidence Astral* series, Ryley sets up a complicated system of visual codes. The objects and scenarios she chooses to photograph, though seeming to act as snapshots, are in no way random. Many of her photographs are of photographs, grouped on walls or on shelves, abutted to bric- a- brac or flowered wallpaper. They are component parts of the complicated jigsaw of family life, seemingly random, but interconnected through mysterious symmetry.

In 2002, a car in the basement of the apartment which Marjolaine had been photographing for the past decade caught fire. Her grandmother and uncle were overcome by smoke and were hospitalised for many weeks. The furnishings and objects of the apartment were coated in a layer of grey grime, transforming them into an eerie installation piece, which challenged the laconic nature of the earlier photographs. It was as if a shroud had been placed over this living interior, transforming it into a tomb. For Marjolaine and her mother Brigitte, cleaning the damaged interior became an excavation of the past:

*'Looking through the soot covered apartment as we cleared and cleaned we began to uncover the layers of her life. Her wedding dress, her jewellery, a swimsuit not worn since I was a child, a letter sent the year I was born by two sets of concerned parents'.*

The apartment fire became a catalyst for a further investigation of family life- the disruption of histories, the revelation of the hidden. For Marjolaine Ryley's photo series, it marked an important step forwards, beyond the surface, and into a deep and dense interior. Photography, by its very nature, is extremely associative. We look at the interiors which Marjolaine Ryley photographs, and then see our own habitats in a different light, causing us perhaps to return to them in a more cautious frame of mind, removing clues, covering our tracks, making it impossible for the mystery to be solved.

Val Williams