

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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Memories Can't Wait

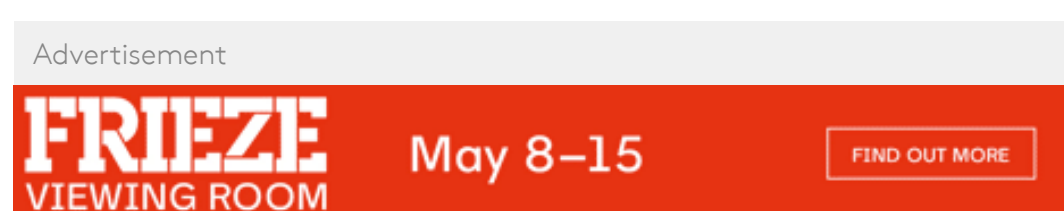
Saul Fletcher



It's probably a little absurd to talk about the noise levels of a photograph, but Saul Fletcher makes the quietest pictures I know of. They're the visual equivalent of lying in a hushed room with your eyes closed, far from anywhere that insists you rush about, or argue, or demand or struggle with traffic of any kind. In Fletcher's world it's as if the most frantic thing you have to deal with is a very faint breath of wind tentatively rattling the window. If so much as a raindrop were to hit the roof, it would be as startling as a gunshot.

It's not an ominous silence, more a slightly skewed one: like finding yourself in a room you know intimately, one that you could navigate with your eyes closed, but which you gradually realize has subtly changed. And what a strange change it is, one less concerned with appearance than with concentration. The humble things and odd people Fletcher depicts seem to be teetering on the verge of disappearing into the ether; modest, intensely still dramas that take place against a pale and lovely paint-exhausted wall. Everything and everyone contained within the narrow confines of the photographs appears to be anticipating something that will never be clarified; even the dying flowers look as though they are waiting to exhale. His palette reflects the weather outside the sanctuary of his London studio: muted greys, tender pinks and greens, and faded golds, all of which seem to have been filtered through a thin veil of drizzle. It is the tiny, sharply focused elements - a branch, a thread, a petal - that interrupt this soft, almost monochrome environment. Look at Fletcher's photographs - or rather, peer into them, which is what their intimate scale demands - and it is quite possible you might suddenly become aware of a new and significant feeling about dusty blooms in modest vases, or the shape of your leg or the expressive possibilities of a grubby piece of string that has been lying under your bed for years.

Which is all very apt, because Fletcher takes his photographs in a room at home, where he meticulously arranges things and people (including himself). By association his photographs reflect - in a curiously oblique way, considering how literal they are - the things and states of mind that people live with: flowers, alienation, old clothes, disguises, mirrors, intimacy, containers, reproductions of pictures, even the little corpses of birds a cat might proudly offer you over breakfast. Which is why you don't really need to know anything about these appropriately untitled images in order to respond to them - they use a visual vocabulary everyone is familiar with. But it is the way Fletcher reveals the exquisite singularity of even the most seemingly nondescript objects that lends his images such an atmosphere of intense introspection: a twig interrupts the wall like a line of music on a white sheet of paper; string criss-crosses the picture plane like cracks in concentration; the delicate red edges of carnations appear like tiny explosions of colour in a drab world.



Fletcher's photographs of people describe scenarios in which the body - mysteriously distorted, comically clothed and occasionally elongated - is frozen into a series of wordless, single-note postures: a child in over-sized clothes stands forlornly against a wall; a figure of indeterminate gender with a long, hanging, bandaged arm wobbles on stilts and is forced to hunch under the ceiling; a man in bowler hat leans against a tall walking-stick, while a child strapped to his back similarly rests against a shepherd's crook. Many of these images are self-portraits, but ones in which the artist has disguised his physical appearance to such an extent that his body has become simply another object in space; no less enigmatic and no more eloquent than a leaf. Like stills from a silent one-act play, people are posited as different kinds of containers through which myriad meanings can be filtered, but what those precise meanings are is open-ended. Photography, the great Realist medium, is employed to emphasize how unreal - and perhaps how resistant to stating its purpose - reality can often be.

Once the things or moments we are attached to disappear, our relationship to them becomes unique - they can't be recalled, or touched, or sold or conversed with except in our imaginations. Which is the obvious explanation for photography's popularity: it is in the medium's elegiac nature to describe something that was once there but which is no longer, and in so doing empathize with the traces of what has been left behind. Looking at Fletcher's photographs is like suddenly remembering the soft breathing of someone you miss. Perhaps his brand of mournful purity is compelling because it manages to tap into something as familiar, and ignored, as a disorganized kitchen drawer: a feeling about the way we connect with objects, or move our bodies, for no apparent reason other than it feels appropriate. Or perhaps it's because, quite simply, he amplifies the things which expect to be overlooked - those that can't be upgraded, or remodelled or replaced - and lets them sing silently in a dim, somehow comforting room.

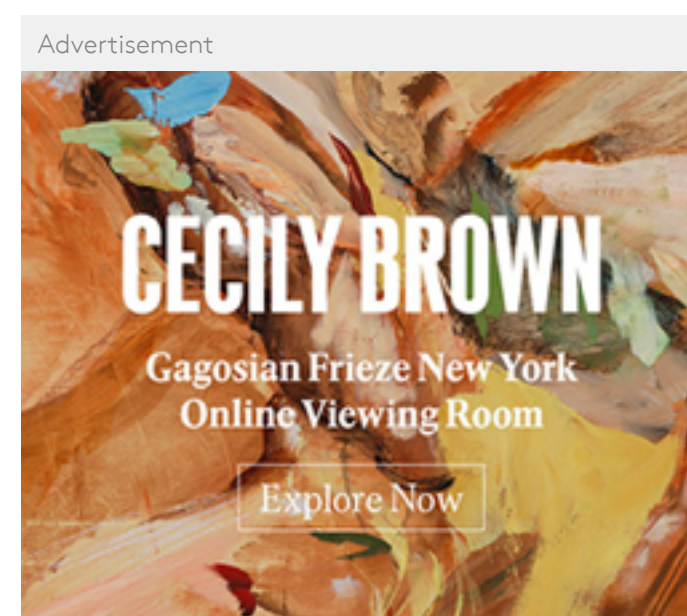
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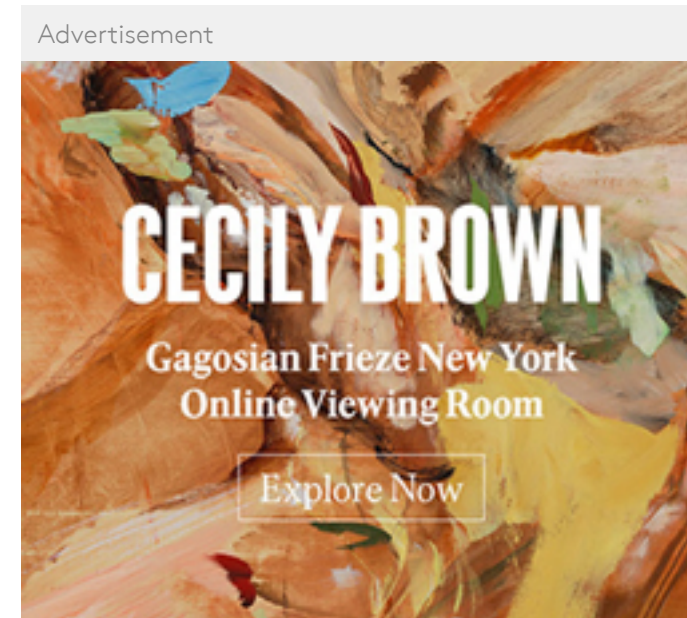
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